

Attacked at the very root

An investigation into Van Gogh's last days



Wouter van der Veen

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My name is Wouter van der Veen. I am a freelance researcher, author and scientific consultant. For more than twenty years, I have been studying the life and work of Vincent van Gogh.

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The ultimate goal of researchers is to make useful discoveries and enhance their understanding of their field. Writers put pen to paper so they can share their conclusions and render their subject accessible to all readers.

Discovering the place where Van Gogh painted his last and most mysterious work is a waking dream which I am still trying to comprehend.

Inasmuch as it can be called my discovery, it has been possible due only to the efforts of others: I did not take the photograph that led to the breakthrough or paint the artwork whose setting was revealed. I am not the owner of the land where the artwork was painted and finally, while others were risking their lives during

the Covid-19 lockdown to care for the sick or to keep the economy going, I had the time to carefully scrutinize a historical document.

I have therefore decided to make this book available as a free download to all who wish to read it.

This digital format means that no trees will be cut down to make the book – a fitting outcome given the subject of the painting.

In addition, as the author of several books released by both big and small publishers, I share the belief of the Institut Van Gogh that the business model of large-scale publications is outdated and no longer useful, particularly not for authors.



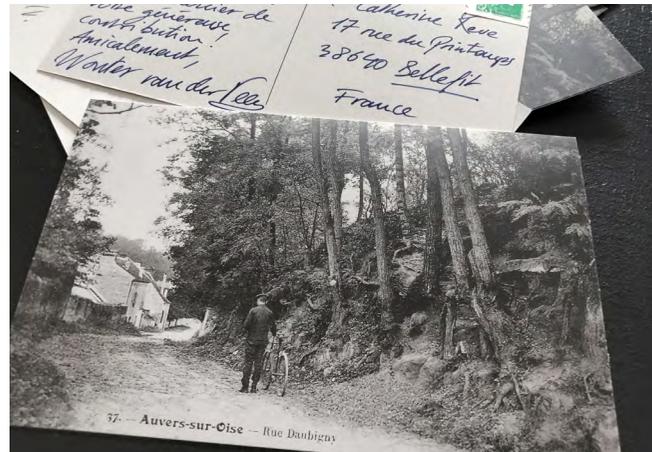
My dearest wish is for this book to be read and enjoyed by as many people as possible. You can help by sharing it with your friends and family.

This book may not come with a price tag, but it comes at some cost. The time, graphic design, translation and a multitude of other small details all add up to an outlay which is considerable for a publishing company as small as mine.

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So if you enjoy the book and would like to help, please consider contributing on www.ardenon.com/roots to my past and future work.

You can do this by purchasing a handwritten, signed reproduction of the historical postcard that enabled my discovery, for 6 € or more. Any funds surplus to the cost of production will be donated by me to the Institut Van Gogh, a non-profit organisation. Although I will need your address to send you the card personally, no data related to this operation will be stored, used or sold.



This approach is based on a belief in goodwill and the capacity for wonder, the qualities that enabled my discovery. I hope this approach will inaugurate a new form of publishing that works to the benefit of its authors and their content, prioritising direct relationships and distancing itself from some of the more exploitative practices in the industry. Generally, I hope that this represents a shift towards a fairer and more responsible way of publishing.

I hope you enjoy your reading and the discovery!

Wouter

«Art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament.»

Emile Zola, *My Hatreds*, 1866.

What can be done — you see I usually try to be quite good-humoured, but my life, too, is attacked at the very root, my step also is faltering. I feared — not completely — but a little nonetheless — that I was a danger to you, living at your expense — but Jo's letter clearly proves to me that you really feel that for my part
I am working and suffering like you.

Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger.
Auvers-sur-Oise, on or about Thursday 10 July 1890.

3 *A Book for All*

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Whenever I look at Van Gogh's last artwork, *Tree Roots*, painted just before he killed himself, I am reminded of a moving remark he made as a young man in a letter to his brother Theo in 1874:

*"If one truly loves nature
one finds beauty everywhere."*

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Tree Roots depicts not only life and death, so often evoked by the artist, but also the beauty and simplicity he 'lived' throughout his life and which the Institut Van Gogh aims to share with all those who come to discover Auvers-sur-Oise and the Vexin region in the heart of the Oise valley.

Dominique-Charles Janssens
President of the Institut Van Gogh

IT MUST HAVE BEEN AROUND TEN IN THE MORNING TOWARDS the end of March, or possibly early April. Dates and days of the week no longer had much meaning. Like everyone else in France, I was holed up at home for the lockdown. I had set up my office in one of my son's bedrooms, as he had been given the more comfortable spare bedroom to allow him more independence.

8 I was sorting out files and folders without much thought. A few months before, I had digitized around two dozen old post cards of Auvers which, for one reason or another, had seemed to me of interest. They dated from the Belle Epoque and had been taken between 1900 and 1910. The scenery on one of them included a roadside covered with roots and tree trunks. I was planning to use it to help explain *Tree Roots*, the last painting by Van Gogh — a disconcerting work which is difficult to understand and was painted by him on the day of his suicide.

This particular card happened to be on the screen when a phone call interrupted my work. As the conversation

dragged on and my attention started wandering, I stared into space, then looked out the window at a big tree I had promised myself to turn into firewood. My gaze drifted to the post card, lingering on the image. I felt a tingling of doubt. I was paying less and less attention to the voice on the other end. My eyes didn't dare believe what they were seeing.

9

I don't remember hanging up, but I remember opening a picture of Van Gogh's last painting on my screen and comparing all the elements one by one, feverishly looking for something that would disprove the improbable and dizzying theory that was taking shape in front of my eyes: I was looking at Van Gogh's *Tree Roots*, but twenty years later. Which meant I suddenly knew where Van Gogh had spent his last day and that an enduring mystery about the end of his life had been solved.

I spent hours putting together the pieces. The post card is not very big and Van Gogh's painting is hard to decipher. But every piece of the puzzle fit and there was nothing to indicate that it was merely a case of

wishful thinking. That evening, I went for a long walk in the forest with my dog to clear my mind. Inevitably, all I could see were tree roots.

The next day, I started again and then again. That evening, I told my wife. Then my three sons. Then Dominique Janssens, the president of the Institut Van Gogh. Finally, around ten days later, I shared my theory with Teio Meedendorp and Louis van Tilborgh, senior researchers at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, who sent it to Bert Maes, a dendrologist.

10

For five weeks, as I awaited their answer, I continued researching and analysing the image. At last, Bert Maes confirmed my theory: the subject of Van Gogh's last painting had most probably been identified, and only 150 meters from the Auberge Ravoux.

I travelled to the site as soon as possible. A small miracle awaited me: a huge mummified stump, covered with ivy, occupied pride of place at the location I had identified. It was the central piece of the painting. It

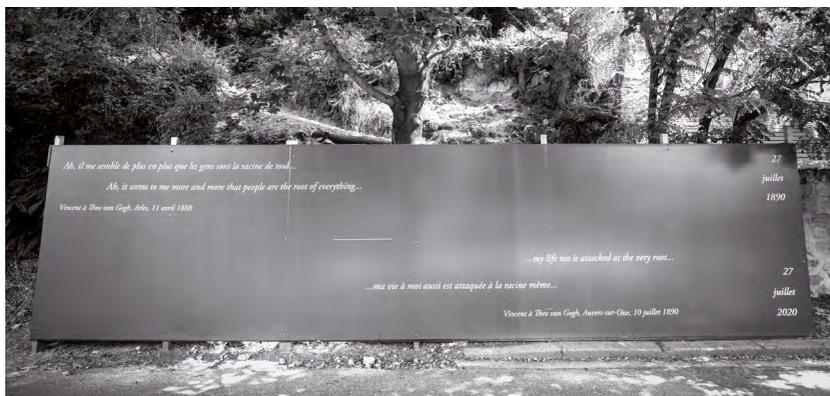
had bided its time patiently and unobtrusively, hidden in plain sight. The owners of the property, incredulous at first, received the news with singular graciousness and were understanding of the need for protective measures to safeguard a piece of wood which in the space of a few weeks had acquired immense historical significance. →

11 Within a few days, Dominique-Charles Janssens arranged for a temporary wooden structure to be erected in the greatest secrecy by a group of experienced craftsmen, while more permanent measures, designed in record time in concert with the relevant authorities, were planned. ✕

This account was written in a few weeks for all those who will share my excitement and emotion at the discovery. It is an immense honour, a great responsibility and an inexpressible privilege. ∞

Introduction

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Attacked at the very root

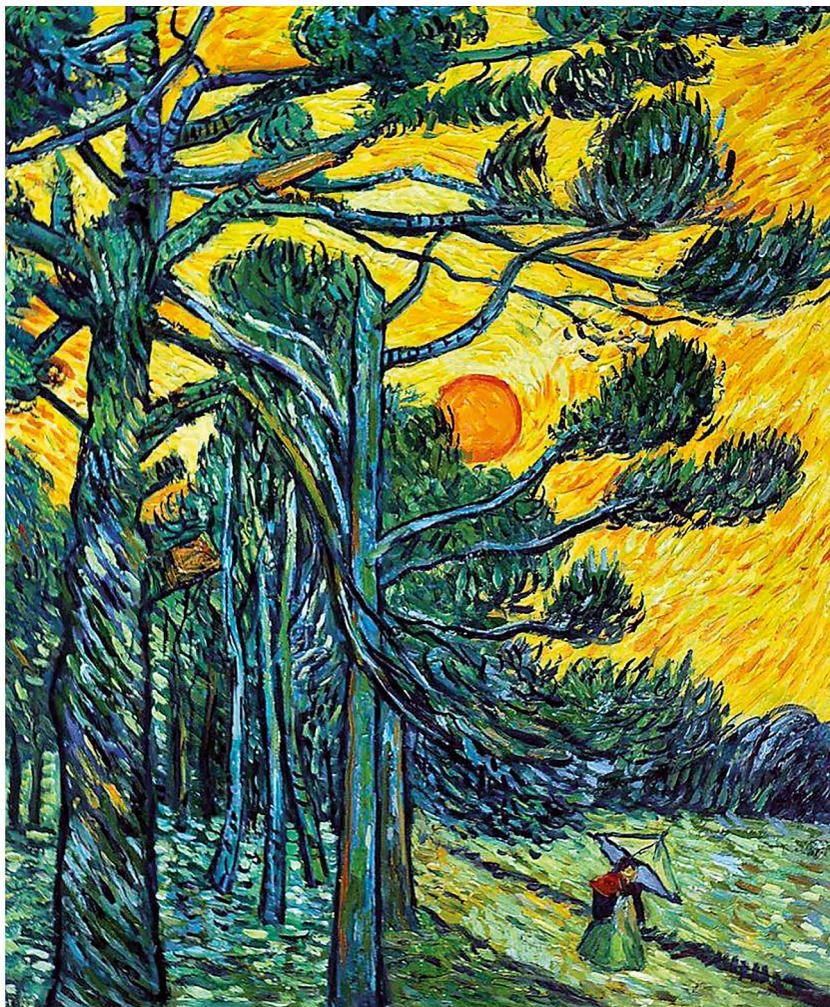
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WHEN HE ARRIVED IN AUVERS-SUR-OISE ON 20 MAY 1890, Vincent van Gogh was fiercely impatient to start painting. He had just spent a year in an asylum, euphemistically called a *Maison de Santé* or 'health institution', near Saint-Remy-de-Provence. He had been admitted as a voluntary patient, having been declared 'mentally disturbed' by the medical authorities and police in Arles, where he had made himself a nuisance to his neighbours and, in a fit of madness, cut off his left ear on 23 December 1889.

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The rules of his hospitalisation were fairly relaxed. He was able to continue his tireless pace of work, except during his four mental breakdowns, when he made several attempts to kill himself. His daily existence did not at all resemble that of a straitjacketed lunatic. He regularly left the institution, not only to paint the surrounding areas, but also to return to Arles and visit the friends he had made there, in particular Mr and Mrs Ginoux and other kindly neighbours who had supported him during his first mental collapse. His last breakdown in Saint-Remy was the longest. From

→ *Pine Trees at Sunset*,
Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1889



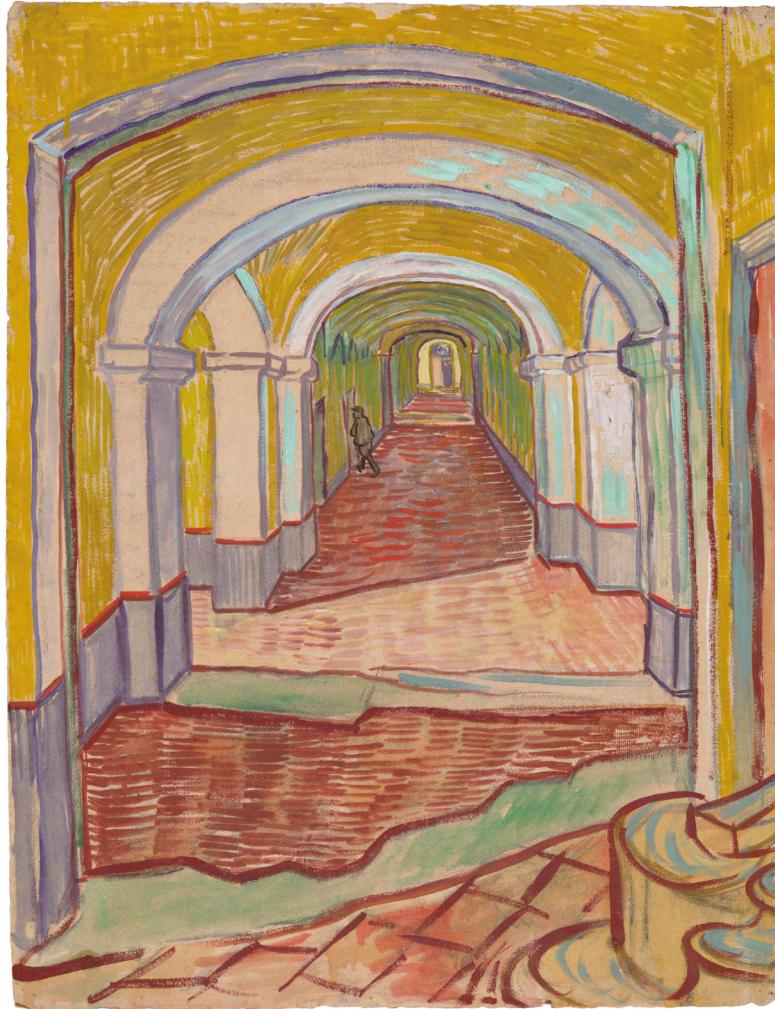
the first week of February to the last week of April, he was virtually incapable of painting, writing or even reading. After his recovery, he could think only about returning to the north.

→ *Corridor in the Asylum*,
Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, 1889

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The spring of 1890 was an important moment in the artist's career. The works sent to Paris and stored by Theo had been seen and admired by his fellow artists. The previous autumn, a talented young art critic, Gabriel-Albert Aurier, had closely examined Vincent's work and in January published in the *Mercure de France* a long article praising this striking art, singling the Dutch artist out as one of the leading avant-garde painters. It was a radical change for the man who signed only his first name — 'Vincent' — on his paintings and he found this sudden acclaim a little troubling:

“When I heard that my work was having some success and read that article I was immediately afraid that I'd regret it — it's almost always the case that success is the worst thing that



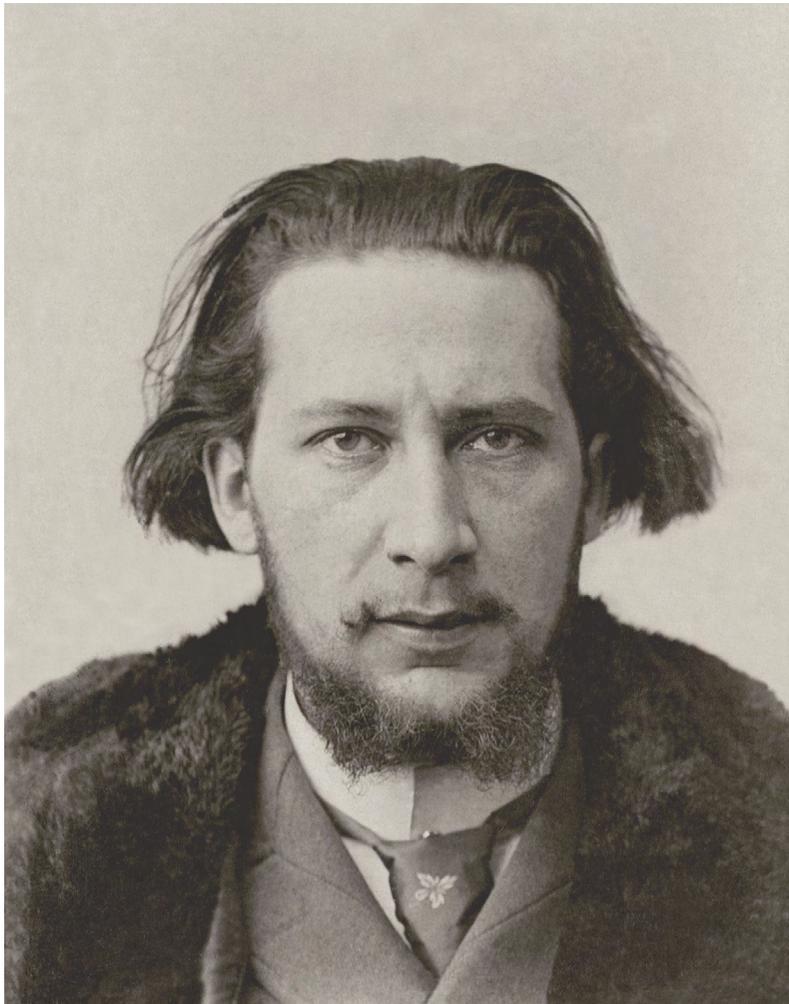
can happen in a painter's life." *To his mother Anna van Gogh-Carbentus and his sister Willemien van Gogh, Saint-Remy-de-Provence, Tuesday 29 April 1890.*

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Before Aurier's article, Van Gogh was known only to the few people he had mixed with in Paris between 1886 and 1888. His uncontrolled behaviour, which often eclipsed his art, had not always left a good impression. But the art critic did not know him personally and focused only on his work. Aurier had met the affable and diplomatic Theo, who was in that respect the direct opposite of his brother. He was also acquainted with Emile Bernard, a young artist who loyally found excuses for the excesses of his fiery friend. The critic was therefore able to study Van Gogh's work dispassionately and what he saw astounded him.

→ Gabriel-Albert Aurier

On a more personal level, however, the stable yet vulnerable relationship Van Gogh had with his younger brother had recently been thrown off kilter by the birth of the artist's namesake. In January, Theo and his wife Jo had become the doting parents of Vincent



Willem van Gogh, named after his uncle. The painter marked the birth of his nephew with the creation of one his greatest masterpieces: *Almond Blossom*. →

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Vincent was happy to welcome the new arrival and considered that his brother was making progress in what he called ‘real life’, meaning the creation of a family and not works of art. However, the fact that Theo now had a family to provide for meant that Van Gogh, fatally, saw his closest confidant grow more distant from him. The closed circle of their relationship now had to accommodate others and from his arrival in Auvers onwards, he often addressed his letters to ‘Theo and Jo’ and not only to ‘Theo’.

Once he had recovered from his last breakdown in Saint-Remy, he was adamant about returning to the north. As always, Vincent’s idea soon took concrete shape. He organised the details of his return journey himself and refused to have anyone accompany him.



The painter believed that the company of his fellow sufferers at the hospital had had a negative impact on his mental and physical health. He also thought his illness, which had never been clearly diagnosed, was linked to his stay in the south of France and that a return to the north, far from the other patients, would suffice to rid him of his malady.

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This perpetual traveller, who had some 36 addresses in his 37 years, instinctively felt drawn back to the last place he had felt at home. Paris was where Theo lived and where they had shared an apartment on Rue Lepic in Montmartre. As the cultural capital of the world at the end of the 19th century, it was also the epicentre of avant-garde art.

His sojourn in Arles from February 1888 to May 1889 had in fact been an expedition. His time in Saint-Remy-de-Provence had been a hospitalisation. His time in Auvers-sur-Oise, 30 kilometres from Paris, was a return to his home base.

“ [...] I still believe that it's above all an illness of the south that I caught, and that the return here will be enough to dispel all that.” *To Theo van Gogh and Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Auvers-sur-Oise, Sunday 25 May 1890.*

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Before travelling to the countryside, Van Gogh spent three days in Paris where he met Jo and young Vincent for the first time. Worried that the over-stimulating surroundings would cause his illness to return, he preferred to stay in the city no longer than necessary. In any case, he would now be closer to his friends and family, as it was only an hour's journey by train to visit each other, which he hoped they would often do.

“I only stayed in Paris for three days, and as the Parisian noise etc. made a pretty bad impression on me I judged it wise for my head to clear off to the countryside.” *To Paul Gauguin, Auvers-sur-Oise, on or about Tuesday 17 June 1890.*

→ The Boulevard Montmartre during the Belle Epoque



148. - PARIS - Boulevard Montmartre

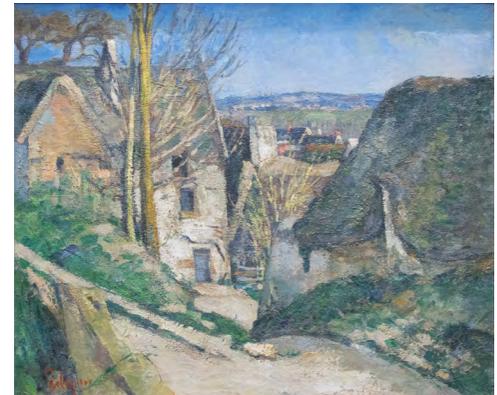
In 1890, Auvers-sur-Oise was already a literally picturesque village that had been immortalised by Charles François Daubigny, Honoré Daumier, Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro, among others. Today practically an open-air museum, it is no exaggeration to state that the village was a big outdoor studio between 1860 and 1890.

During Vincent van Gogh's stay alone, dozens of painters were to be found on the streets and in the fields of Auvers. A fellow countryman, Anton Hirschig, boarded in the room next to his at the Auberge Ravoux (Café de la Mairie) in the heart of the village. To such an extent did painters come and go, taking a room or sometimes only their meals, that Gustave Arthur Ravoux, the owner of the inn, allowed them to use a space at the back of the building as a sort of collective studio. In addition, as noted in a letter written by Van Gogh on 10 June: "*a whole colony of Americans has installed itself beside the house where I am. They paint, but I haven't yet seen what they do.*"



↑ Paul Cézanne in Auvers-sur-Oise

↓ *The Hanged Man's House*,
Paul Cézanne, 1873



Van Gogh could also rely on the kindly interest and occasional visits of Dr Paul Ferdinand Gachet, a doctor and passionate admirer of the art of his day. Gachet had some form of acquaintance with all of Paris's most innovative artists and had for decades been acquainted with leading art critics. When the first Impressionist exhibition took place in 1874, Cézanne's *A Modern Olympia* was on loan from him.

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He had a practice in Paris, but liked spending almost half his time in Auvers, where he had bought in 1872 a big and austere house, formerly a girls' boarding school, with beautiful views of the Oise valley. Here he grew medicinal plants and made enlightened but slightly amateurish paintings and etchings under the name Paul van Ryssel. The inelegant yet often touching clumsiness of his work is so consistent as to constitute a characteristic style whose only known admirer, however, was his son and namesake.

His approach to medicine was as original and innovative as his approach to art. He disliked surgical

→ The Auberge Ravoux
(*Café de la Mairie*), in 1890

↓





intervention and his treatments were plant – and electricity-based. He sold a concoction of his own invention, a sort of antiseptic treatment for bullet and knife wounds, and he also prescribed homeopathic remedies. His doctorate, gained from the University of Montpellier, was on the subject of melancholy. Of particular interest is that he was a military surgeon during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and consequently very familiar with gunshot wounds. This knowledge would be of tragic use in his relationship with Van Gogh, whom he met on 20 May 1890 and cared for as the artist lay dying 70 days later.

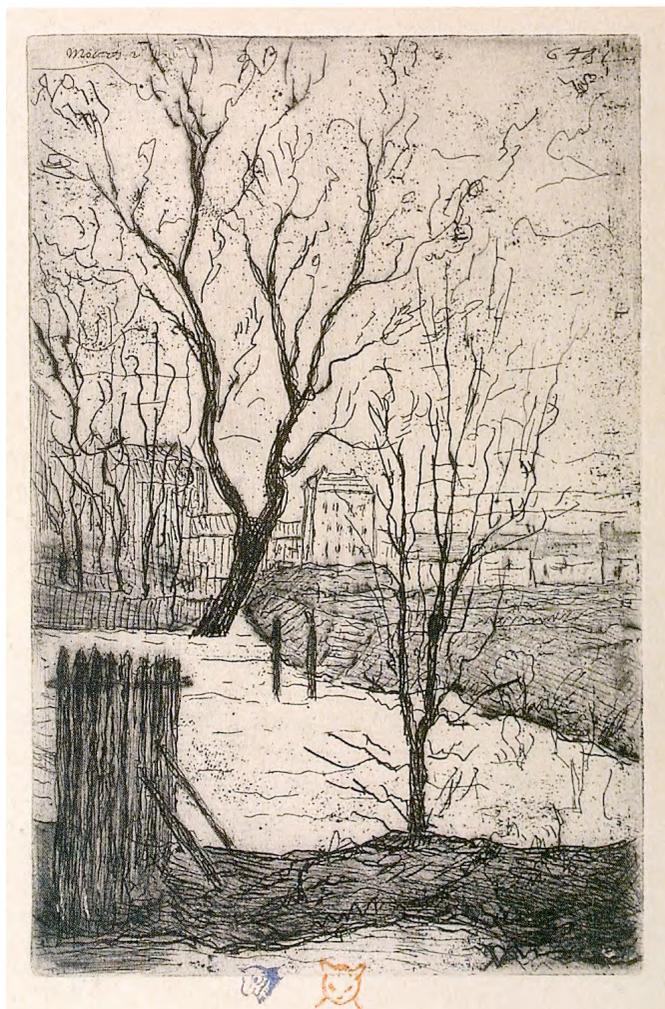
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Before his arrival in Auvers, Vincent had never met Gachet, but he knew that he was making the acquaintance of a man who moved in prestigious yet diverse artistic circles. The artist-doctor had treated Cézanne, Corot, Daubigny, Daumier, Guillaumin, Manet, Renoir and the Pissarro family. It had in fact been Camille Pissarro who suggested to Theo that Vincent be settled in Auvers-sur-Oise and that his wellbeing be entrusted to Gachet.

→ *Auvers Landscape*, etching,
Paul Ferdinand Gachet, 1878



↑ Dr Gachet



Attacked at the very root

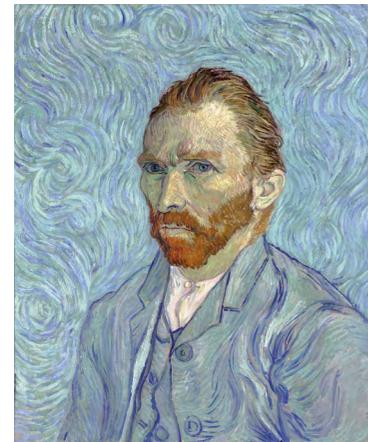
Upon arrival in Auvers, the Dutch artist knew he was following in illustrious footsteps. With this in mind, he disembarked with two paintings serving both as character references and as a profession of faith: his *Self Portrait* from Saint-Remy-de-Provence and a version of *L'Arlésienne*. The first was a testament to seriousness: he had depicted himself straight-backed and impeccably dressed, hair combed, beard trimmed, his gaze piercing. He looked sure of himself, but not arrogant, against a background of swirling but restrained tints of soft blue, offset by the orange and pale yellow tones of his face and hair to obtain the complementary colour balance he often used to express calm and restfulness.

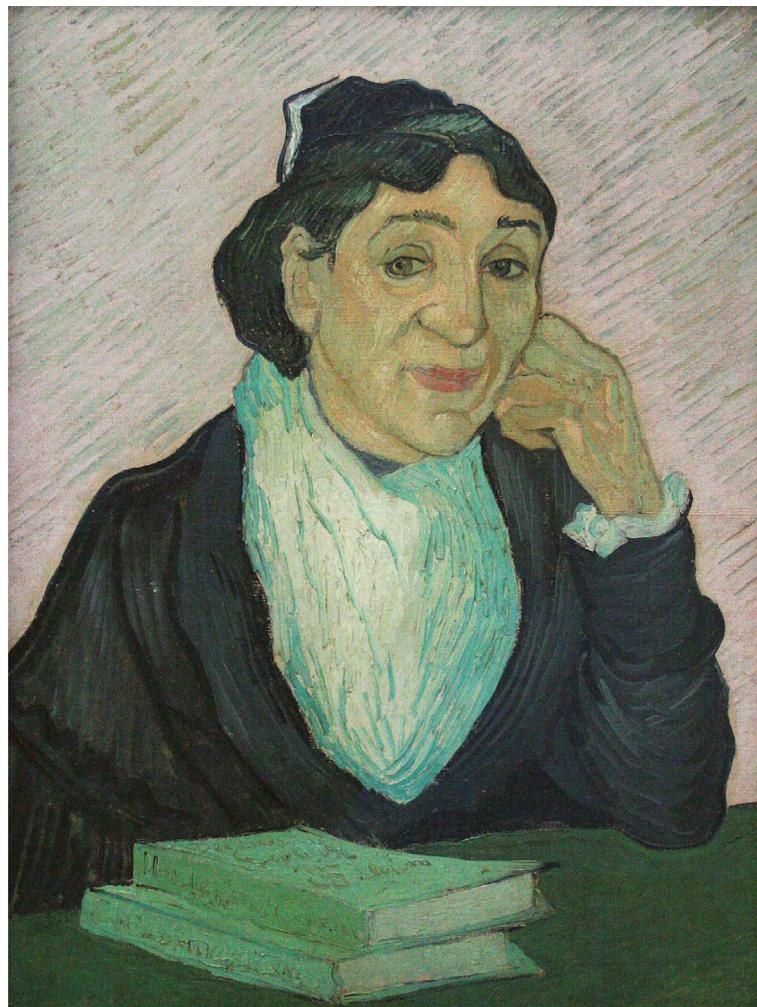
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The second, *L'Arlésienne*, testified to his fruitful collaboration with another towering figure of the Parisian avant-garde: Paul Gauguin. Gachet was instantly impressed with the first painting, but it took some time for the second to grow on him before he came to understand and admire it.

→

↓ *Self-portrait*

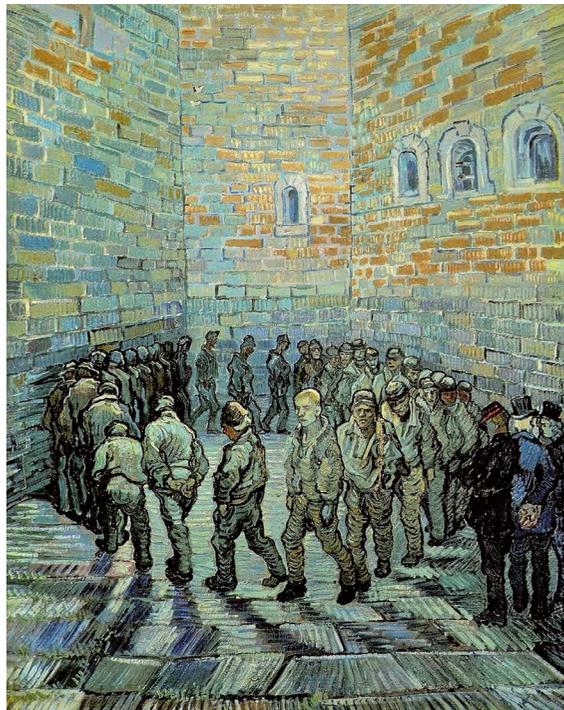




Two other significant pieces constituting Van Gogh's artistic self-introduction were works inspired by other artists: *Pietà* after Delacroix and *Prisoners Exercising* after Gustave Doré. ∞

→ *Pietà* – after E. Delacroix

↘ *Prisoners Exercising*
– after G. Doré



VINCENT'S RELOCATIONS FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER were often accompanied by works of special significance. His departure from Nuenen for Antwerp in 1885 was marked by the completion of *The Potato Eaters*, in which he wished to display everything he knew of composition, mastery of light and power of expression. It was extremely modern, indirectly inspired by the novels of Zola, various books on the condition of peasants and also quite simply by the stark realities of life. It served both as a stock-taking and a milestone: he would now change direction. He had seen his native Brabant and his ambition was henceforth to refine his technique, rub shoulders with other painters and get a taste of urban life. →

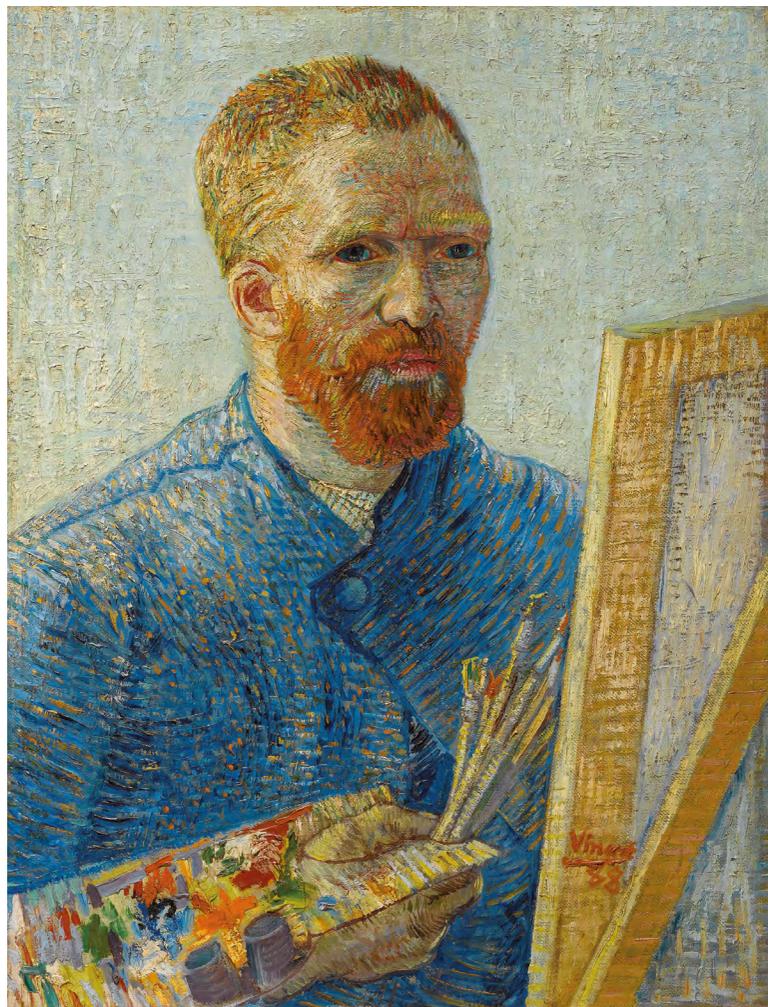
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In Antwerp, he immediately saw colours that were brighter and more contrasting. But he was alone, as he had been in Drenthe two years before, and he left the Flemish capital after a few months to join Theo in Paris. Leaving quite literally like a thief in the night, he abandoned his possessions, his debts and probably works of art of which, sadly, nothing is known.



Towards the end of his two-year stint in Paris from March 1886 to February 1888, Vincent painted a self-portrait representing himself as an artist. Another of his milestone works, he appears bloated from his drinking sprees, haggard but also focused, wearing a blue overall, his palette covered with the unblended colours he used in his paintings. This depiction of himself as an artist-labourer reflected a profound conviction of being more craftsman than artist and that his work made sense only if its destination was the art market. Just as a plumber does not weld pipes for the greater glory of plumbing, Van Gogh did not paint to elevate the art of painting or to adorn museum walls: he painted because he wanted to sell his work to lovers of modern art. →

Van Gogh was perfectly aware of the importance of his own life as an inextricable element of his work. As an art lover, it would never have occurred to him to look at paintings or read books without learning about the people who made them.



“I know no better definition of the word *Art* than this, ‘Art is man added to nature’, nature, reality, truth, but with a meaning, with an interpretation, with a character that the artist brings out and to which he gives expression, which he sets free, which he unravels, releases, elucidates.”

To Theo van Gogh, Wasmès, on or about Thursday 19 June 1879.

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To this end, he carefully documented his career and researched the lives of artists who interested him, such as Jean-François Millet and Eugene Delacroix. When reading Van Gogh’s letters, it is important to keep in mind that they were written for a wider audience than the people they were addressed to. He also urged Theo to take good care not only of his own letters, but those of other artists too.

When he left Arles for Saint-Remy-de-Provence in 1889, he made another of his stock-taking self-portraits. Unusual in containing only allusions to him, it is a still life depicting a drawing board placed on

a table. Foregrounded is an empty bottle of Pernod absinthe. Behind the bottle are a tobacco pouch and a pipe, which were always on hand as Van Gogh enjoyed their narcotic effect. Next is a plate with onions, the remedy for every ill, as recommended by the pinkish book to the right of the plate, the *The Health Guide* by François Vincent Raspail. On the right, a burnt match on an envelope, which probably contained a letter from Theo conveying affection, thoughts and money. At the very top, to the right, are two objects that look like a match box and a sealing wax stick. A lit candle in a candlestick is teetering on the edge of the drawing board. Finally, right at the back is a large water pitcher (a Provençal jug or water cooler which usually contained three litres) filled with coffee.

↓ *Still life with a plate of onions*



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This still life contained all the elements — none of them to do with painting — that had kept the artist going during his time in Arles. It is an inventory of his stimulants and excesses, a portrait in which the identity of the sitter must be guessed from just a conceptual outline. The goal of the painting was to

document a transition from one way of life to another. The teetering candle symbolised the tenuous position between life and death resulting from his self-abuse — death was a theme he addressed without hesitation in his work, notably in the form of reapers. →

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“I then saw in this reaper — a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil — I then saw the image of death in it, in this sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So if you like it’s the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.” To Theo van Gogh, Saint-Remy-de-Provence, Thursday, 5 and Friday, 6 September 1889.

During his time in Auvers, Van Gogh painted two pieces which can be interpreted as milestone paintings similar to those made at the end of other stages of his life. The first is *Garden in Auvers*. The motif can to a certain extent be compared to *Daubigny’s Garden*, but ↓





there are no distinctive features identifying where it was painted. The work presents a striking combination of different influences in terms both of craftsmanship and composition: pointillism, japonisme, cloisonnism and the absence of a horizon. It seems almost like the summary of a conversation about art between Van Gogh, Signac, Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard.

42

The second milestone painting, or in this case testament painting, is *Tree Roots*. As Ronald Pickvance notes in *Van Gogh in Saint-Remy and Auvers*: “The painting is almost a lexicon of Van Gogh’s Auvers style: flat, single-color areas contrast with areas of superimposed colors; the graphic brick-shape hatchings create a fluid surface rhythm; and the final, heavy contours of Prussian blue help bind together the strangely disparate forms.” However, it is not only in the form but above all in the subject matter that the artist is revealing his final thoughts. ∞

↓



VAN GOGH'S FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH DOCTOR GACHET at the end of May and early June were exhilarating for both men. Gachet recommended that Van Gogh work as much as possible to prevent his illness from taking over. The Dutch painter could not have dared hope for a treatment that would better suit him.

43

His growing reputation, eloquently captured by Gabriel-Albert Aurier, had been confirmed by the reception of his pieces exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants and at the Vingtistes show in Brussels. He was, however, developing a reputation as an eccentric outsider of fragile mental stability. Van Gogh was clear-headed about his periods of insanity and did not shrink away from the subject, but he did not wish his art to be seen as the work of a madman.

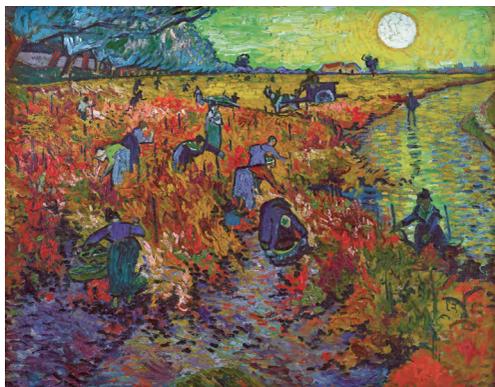
This was becoming a real possibility requiring active resistance. When his paintings were exhibited in Belgium, a journalist for the Dutch newspaper *Het Vaderland*, having disparaged in every possible way the innovative art he had taken it upon himself to describe, wrote on 26 January: →

The so-called ‘vingtistes’, these twenty scribblers who have united themselves in an association, must receive pride of place in my catalogue. Their annual hoax, which they affect, with great generosity, to call an exhibition, has been running for several days. We will not hold it against them.

At best, their disorder is worthy of the attention of Lombroso, or Hecker, or some other authority in the field of psychiatry. Simply looking at their catalogue suffices to make this clear. *Happy landscape* (imaginary Mesopotamia); *Still Water in a Garden of Serenity*; *Masks Confronting Death and Skeletons Warming Themselves*. It is confounding that some talented men who are not part of the association decided to send their work to such a madhouse. This does not, however,

apply to Mr Vincent van Gogh from Saint-Remy (one of your compatriots?). Quite the contrary: this is exactly the right place for him.

However, he did remind me of Raphael. While looking at his *Red Vineyard*, I heard a



lady, like Correggio seeing the depiction of Saint Cecilia, exclaim: ‘*Anch’io son’ pittore*’.* And the good woman explained to me that she could obtain the same effect by scattering red cabbage on cooked chicory. A maid comparing herself to Raphael. But this

is perhaps exactly what characterises the ambition of the ‘vingtistes’.

Recently rediscovered review, *Het Vaderland*, 28 January 1890, ‘Belgian Letters’, signed ‘R’.

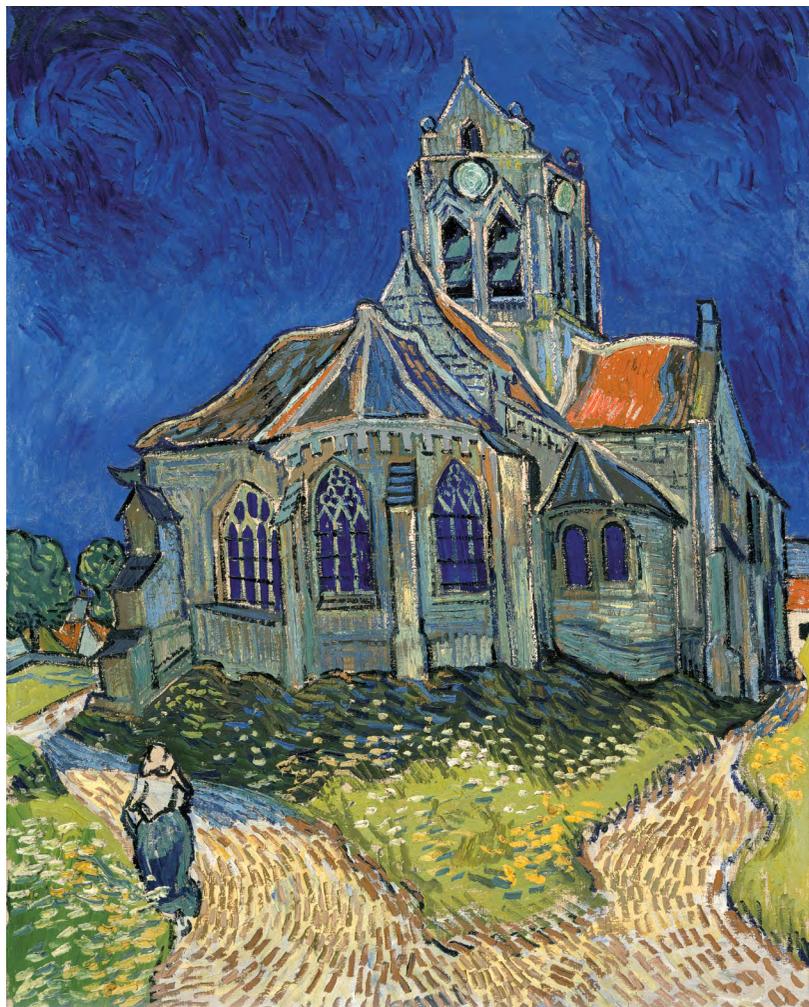
* An unknown young painter who would one day become the great Correggio, looking at a painting by Raphael, is supposed to have cried: ‘I too am a painter!’ (“*anch’io son’ pittore!*”).

Van Gogh's goal was to enter the art market and sell his work. The time had come for him to transform his paintings, which he saw as assets, into cash. To do this, he needed to prove that he was the workaholic and erudite artist, the master of colour described by Aurier in the *Mercure de France*, as well as the best painter of the *Indépendants*, as declared by Claude Monet. And, also, that he was in full possession of his faculties.

45

One of his first paintings in Auvers reflects this battle-ready state of mind. *The Church at Auvers* is an artistic show of force. The size, ambition, difficulty of technique and startlingly successful execution make this painting inarguably one of his greatest, on the same level as *Sunflowers* and *Starry Night over the Rhône*. The scene is backlit under a thick blue sky and etched into the canvas like a multi-colour bas-relief, in perfectly contrasted tints and shades both bold and refined. The ordinary figure of a passer-by and some bits of houses representing the village pepper the scene. Van Gogh's individualized knowledge of

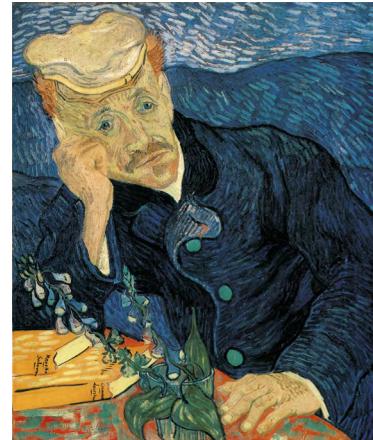
→



perspective, the shower of light in which he bathes the scenes and the suppleness of his lines give the monument a life of its own on canvas.

47 He accomplished his objective. Doctor Gachet was amazed by his brilliance, which was demonstrated once again in the painting Van Gogh made of him. This portrait was of immense importance, as it proved that Vincent was unquestionably in the same league as Daubigny, Corot, Cézanne and Pissarro. He depicted the medical man in the position of Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholy*, leaning his elbows on a table on which are placed a foxglove stem and two modern, realist novels, the contents of which he thought were depictions of 'life as it is'.

Gachet invited Van Gogh to dine at his house on several occasions. The artist met his children Paul, 17, and Marguerite, 20, of whom he made a surprising portrait at the piano. During every visit, they talked and painted. On Sunday 25 May, the doctor presented his hand press to the painter along with a copper



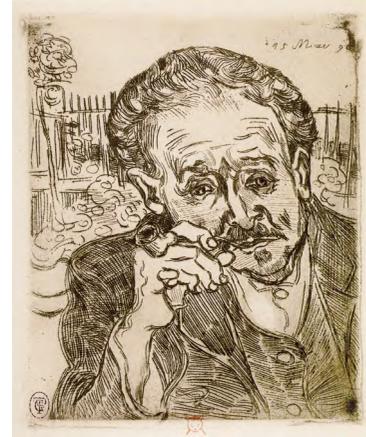
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plate. Within a few moments, Van Gogh's only etching, *Man with a pipe*, was made. Years later, Paul Gachet Jr printed as many impressions as he could, wearing the plate down to its very limit.

On Sunday 8 June, Theo, Jo and young Vincent had also been invited to the doctor's house. It was a beautiful day and everyone remembered it fondly.

“Sunday has left me a very pleasant memory. In this way we really feel that we're not so far from one another, and I hope that we'll see each other again often” *Vincent to Theo and Jo, Auvers-sur-Oise, Tuesday 10 June 1890.*

↓



The month of June passed without incident and the paintings were stacking up. Things appeared to be going well, even though Vincent wasn't quite able to find the balance he was looking for. He thought of renting a house so that he could live there and have a studio and dreamt of being able to receive his brother and his young family more often. He was convinced

this would be advantageous for everyone's health, but it also seems likely that he wanted to be less alone.

At the start of July, the anxieties that had been eating away at Vincent suddenly overwhelmed him. After a pointless quarrel over an unframed painting by Guillamin, he stopped seeing the Gachet family. He no longer spent time with the other artists in Auvers and gradually withdrew into ever-darkening thoughts.

→ Wheatfield with Crows

49

A visit to Theo and Jo on Sunday 6 July 1890 seems to have played a pivotal role in this depressive state of mind — or perhaps it merely revealed it. His brother's affairs, too, were troubled. The young father, who was starting to show the first signs of syphilis, was concerned about the health of his son, who had frequent and unexplained bouts of heartrending crying. His wife 'did not have enough milk' and his friendship with her brother Andries Bonger was also under strain, as Bonger had suddenly backed out of a business venture they had agreed to undertake together. In addition, Theo's relationship with his employers was



on tenterhooks and he had sent them an ultimatum demanding better terms and threatening to resign.

Theo, understandably anxious not only about his health, but also about all his family, relationship and work problems, was less diplomatic than usual during his brother's visit. Vincent, never able to adapt to other people's circumstances, did not understand his younger brother's problems and soon lost what little patience he had. He returned to Auvers profoundly disturbed by what he had seen and experienced in Paris, convinced that he was a serious financial burden to his brother and doubtful as to the happiness of Theo's household. As if in echo to his sombre thoughts, human figures disappeared from his paintings. Even in his picture of the town hall at Auvers, painted on 14 July, the national day of France, there is not a single person to be seen.



↑ *The Town Hall at Auvers*

The surviving correspondence between the two brothers in those three weeks from Sunday 6 to Sunday 23 July is chaotic and disjointed. Theo and Jo set off to

Holland for family and work reasons. Vincent protested against and then accepted their journey. He subsequently drew attention to Theo's domestic quarrels, to his brother's bewilderment. Jo interceded, sending peace offerings and trying to put out a fire she hoped she had not started. But communication was difficult and fraught letters crossed each other, were forwarded and then received with delays between Paris, Leyden, Amsterdam and Auvers-sur-Oise.

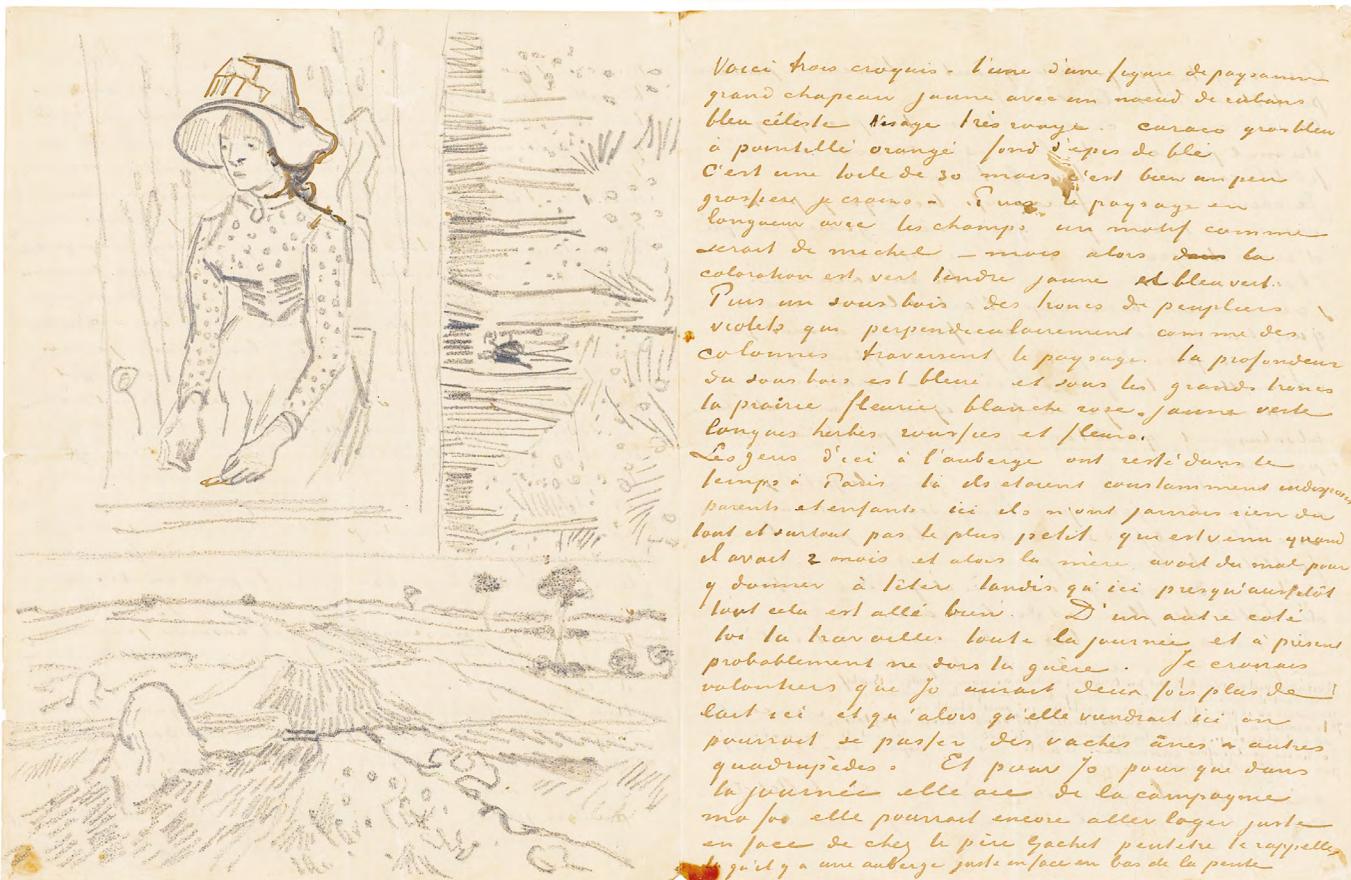
52

Making the task more difficult for historians studying the letters more than a century later, is the fact that Vincent was not in the habit of dating his correspondence. In addition, of the letters that survived, some are drafts, fragments of drafts, or were never sent. Others, written by Jo, Vincent and perhaps Theo, were lost.

It is therefore extremely difficult to accurately reconstruct the last few weeks of Van Gogh's life and work. The fragments we do have reveal a state of mind that was depressive at the very least. The Gachet family could provide no insight into the weeks preceding



↑ Jo and Theo



Voici nos croquis. L'une d'une figure de paysanne
 grand chapeau jaune avec un nœud de rubans
 bleu céleste visage très rouge. caraco gris-bleu
 à pointelle orange fond d'epes de bleu
 C'est une robe de 30 mètres, c'est bien un peu
 grosse pour moi. Puis le paysage en
 longueur avec les champs un motif comme
 serait de mechet - mais alors dans la
 coloration est vert tendre jaune et bleu vert.
 Puis un sous-bois des troncs de peupliers
 violet qui perpendiculairement comme des
 colonnes traversent le paysage. La profondeur
 du sous-bois est bleu et sous les grands troncs
 la prairie fleurie blanche rose, jaune verte
 longues herbes courtes et fleuries.
 Les gens d'ici à l'auberge ont resté dans le
 temps à Paris là ils étaient constamment endormis
 parents et enfants ici ils n'ont jamais rien de
 tout et surtout pas le plus petit qui est venu quand
 l'avait 2 mois et alors la mère avait du mal pour
 y donner à têter tandis qu'ici presque aussitôt
 tout cela est allé bien. D'un autre côté
 les la travailleur toute la journée et à présent
 probablement ne dors la nuit. Je croirais
 volontiers que je vivrais de ce côté plus de
 tout ici et qu'alors qu'elle voudrait ici on
 pourrait se passer des vaches ânes et autres
 quadrupèdes. Et puis je pense que dans
 la journée elle avec de la campagne
 moi je elle pourrait encore aller loger juste
 en face de chez le père Gachet peut-être le rappelle
 qu'il y a une auberge juste en face en bas de la pente

his suicide, as they no longer saw him. Twenty years after the fact, Anton Hirschig, his neighbour, made some confused statements from which not much can be ascertained. His accounts at least do not claim to be entirely accurate or beyond dispute. He himself emphasized that his recall was imperfect and that he was probably mistaken about some things. There are other much more self-assured accounts, but they are contradictory and at times inconsistent.

54

Nevertheless, there are a few key milestones which have been conclusively identified and allow for some insight into how events played out. Together, the textual and iconographic evidence form a sort of gigantic puzzle whose pieces, when (re)discovered, are assembled and disassembled as science advances and knowledge grows.

It is fairly simple, for instance, to date *Young Girl Against a Background of Wheat* to between 25 June and 1 July, because Vincent wrote in a letter, which has been dated to Tuesday 24 June, that he would →



‘perhaps’ have a ‘country girl to pose’. He then provided a sketch of the completed painting in a letter written on 2 July.

56 Other paintings have been more problematic and have in the past led to confusion, such as *Wheatfield with Crows*, often depicted in films as his last painting, possibly due to its dramatic force and because elements such as the black birds, dark clouds and dead-end paths lend themselves to sinister interpretations. Later, this iconic work was identified as the subject of a letter written on 10 July, in which Van Gogh describes three of his paintings: ‘They’re immense stretches of wheatfields under turbulent skies, and I made a point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness.’ However, *Wheatfield with Crows* very clearly does not contain one or several ‘immense stretches of wheatfields’. Moreover, he adds: “[...] *these canvases will tell you what I can’t say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside*”, a description that seems incompatible with the work in question, although it is true that Van Gogh sometimes found →



a good storm invigorating. Nevertheless, this cannot be his last painting, as the wheat is still standing in the field and has not been harvested, as is the case in other works evidently completed at a later stage. In short, the precise date he painted *Wheatfield with Crows* is not — yet — known with certainty. ∞

THE EVIDENCE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE APPEARS TO CONFIRM that his last painting was *Tree Roots*. This had already been suggested by Louis van Tilborgh in 1990 in a catalogue for the extensive exhibition commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Van Gogh's death. In *Van Gogh in Auvers* [Monacelli, 2009], which contained a necessarily incomplete and imperfect chronological reconstruction of the painter's oeuvre, I too argued that the 50 cm × 100 cm painting was Van Gogh's last, reasoning thus:

59

Tree Roots is probably Vincent van Gogh's most audacious painting from any period. The subject matter is hard to discern. Is it an underwood, a roadside or an imaginary place? Is it even a place? Where do the branches end, where do the shadows begin, what is the scale of the painting? How does it all stay upright and on what kind of surface and why?

These questions will probably never be answered. That is not the point of the painting. The colours

and shapes live their own life, independent of the subject matter. In this respect, *Tree Roots* prefigures abstract painting and anticipates German expressionism. Categorising this as the last of the Auvers art works is no less valid than selecting those of the wheat fields or haystacks or gardens. The argument is based on the idea that this work represents the culmination of an artistic exploration that resulted in the splintering of traditional figurative codes.

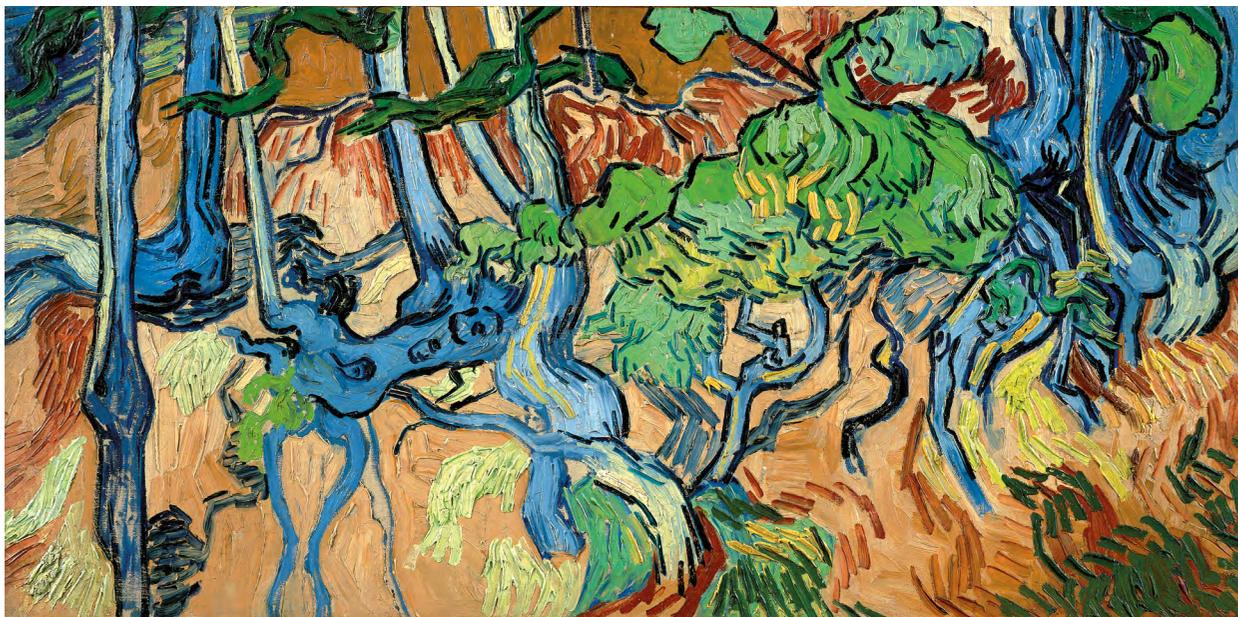
60

Sadly, the exploratory direction in which Van Gogh was moving at the end of that month of July did not lead to any more pieces displaying the same talent, skill and desire to innovate. The revelation of this new field of art, in which only the paint itself can be understood, was immense and dizzying. As the first to venture onto this path leading to a veritable artistic revolution, the painter must have felt all the more alone for it.

This intuition was correct, even if the arguments were not entirely accurate or sufficiently wide-ranging. In 2012, in a remarkable paper published by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which is the authority on and custodian of the painting, Louis van Tilborgh and Bert Maes showed that *Tree Roots* was indeed the last work by Van Gogh. Their theory is supported by an almost indisputable textual source: the testimony of Andries Bonger, who claimed that the piece was made the very morning of the artist's suicide on 27 July 1890. Lending further credence to his statement is the fact that the painting is incomplete, which is unusual for Van Gogh. In another paper Van Tilborgh co-wrote with his colleague Teio Meedendorp in 2013, they conclude that the subject matter reflects the despair characteristic of a suicidal state of mind. It is therefore extremely plausible that, having spent the morning working on this painting confronting him with his own melancholy, Van Gogh took it back to the Auberge Ravoux and left with a revolver to take his own life.

61

→



Van Tilborgh and Maes also suggest a possible motif: a coppice on the slope of a hill, close to one of the many abandoned quarries of the village. The coppice is slowly but surely disintegrating as a result of erosion, with runoff water washing away the earth and exposing the roots of tree trunks scarred by age, repeated felling and landslides. The authors very tentatively suggest that the painting may have been painted close to Rue Gachet, for the simple reason that there are coppices on such faces in the area. They rightly point out that the artist would have needed sufficient space, such as would be provided by the width of a street, to step back from the scene as he painted it. →

Even assuming that the location was indeed on a street, selecting one road over another in Auvers-sur-Oise is no easy task. Coppices like these can be found in numerous locations, such as the faces overhanging the *Chemin des Carrières* (Quarry Path) above Butry-sur-Oise, for instance. Auvers is spread out over more than seven kilometres and lies between a hill and the ↓





village's eponymous river, offering an almost infinite number of possible locations for *Tree Roots*. It does, however, seem clear from the articles by Van Tilborgh, Maes and Meedendorp that the geographical search area can be narrowed down to within reasonable walking distance from the Auberge Ravoux. Even in its unfinished state, the painting would have required several hours' work, leaving the artist with that much less time to set out and return.

66 These are the only definite clues available to those trying to identify the exact setting for Van Gogh's final masterpiece. No other painter from that era is known to have created comparable close-up images of coppices. Photographs of Auvers from between 1880 and 1900 are rare. Any attempt to identify the subject of this last painting would thus appear to have little hope of success.

Paul Gachet Jr, in the manuscript that would become *The 70 days of Vincent van Gogh in Auvers*, argued with some justification that *Tree Roots* did not depict a place with any local character and that it was therefore impossible to identify where it was painted. Before Van Tilborgh and Maes's explanation, the most renowned experts, such as Jan Hulsker and Ronald Pickvance, maintained for many years that this intriguing painting was inexplicable, as much in its form as in its aim.

67

It is not known for certain where Van Gogh killed himself, but it is generally believed that it was 'behind the castle'. In 2011, Steven Naifeh and Gregory Smith, attorneys turned writers, published a biography placing great and unusual emphasis on Van Gogh's sexual appetites. Traditionally drawn as a tragic hero, Van Gogh in their account becomes a tragic anti-hero, prisoner of his desires, inept and unsuited for life in civilised society.

A low canvas, a stretched-out scene, an absent sky. This so-called underwood is entirely indecipherable: it is merely a pretext for a mess, in terms both of colour and outline, of unrecognisable roots, stumps, trunks and grasses. Similar motifs appear in Vincent's art more than once, but in a more refined, more precise manner.

Here, he lingers on a sandy patch, making the ground a pinkish yellow colour, streaked with emerald greens and ochre browns. Trunks, blue-purple or grey, rise from the foliage in dark and sombre greens.

This painting is not a landscape: it is a study devoid of any local character. It is therefore impossible to place it in any of the woods in the countryside around Auvers.

—

Paul Gachet, *The 70 days of Vincent van Gogh in Auvers*, 1959 (published in 1994 by Alain Mothe).



68

The most original and most intriguing of these paintings stretched out in their length is the one in which tree trunks and roots painted in blue and branches painted in green can be recognised, but the depiction as a whole cannot be explained.

—
Jan Hulsker, *Van Gogh en zijn weg, het complete werk*, 1977.

Ambiguous, stylized, vitalistic, life-affirming, antinaturalistic yet palpably organic: a kind of Art Nouveau frieze. No foreground, no element on which the viewer can get his spatial bearings, no sky to differentiate background from foreground, no stabilizing horizontal. [...] The motif could be part of the steep rise of the hillside, with the village below and the plain above, that characterizes the length of Auvers; Van Gogh could have found it at almost any point.

—
Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*, 1986.

At the last minute and unbeknownst to many of the experts consulted by the authors while researching the book, a rather strange annexe was inserted. This addition, containing as it did a sensationalist interpretation of the events leading to the painter's death, resulted in a great deal of publicity. In this account, Van Gogh did not commit suicide, but was killed by two young men, the Secrétan brothers. Public interest focused entirely on a poorly-documented event lending itself to all sorts of wild speculation. Naifeh and Smith's outlandish theory, based entirely on hunches and a distorted understanding of historical documents, has had a profound impact on the public and the media's perception of the end of the painter's life. Two film productions (*Loving Vincent* in 2017 and *At Eternity's Gate* in 2018) as well as numerous press articles have presented this theory as if it were an actual possibility, the tone veering from the semi-enlightened 'you never know' to complete fiction. The truth is that after the publication in 2013 of Van Tilborgh and Meedendorp's paper (*The Life and Death of Vincent van Gogh*), there is no longer any debate as to whether

→ *Haystacks*, Auvers-sur-Oise,
end of July 1890



Van Gogh committed suicide. No serious scholar views the theory of Naifeh and Smith as anything other than unsubstantiated fabrication.

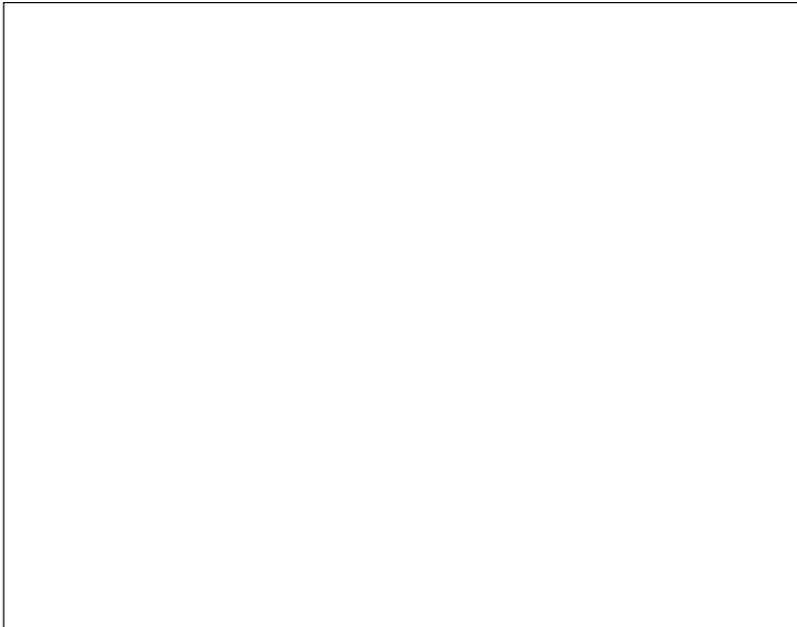
No story seems too far-fetched when it comes to Van Gogh. Over the past few years, for instance, we have been asked to believe that his ear was in fact sliced off by a sword-wielding Paul Gauguin and that Vincent filled a large sketchbook with drawings in which his artistic talent seems to have temporarily abandoned him.

71

What we know of Van Gogh's suicide does not lend itself to endless debate. He had already tried to kill himself several times. He suffered from numerous chronic diseases and his letters show that he was anything but optimistic about the future. For any other theory to be credited, significant evidence would have to be produced and this has not yet been the case. Van Gogh has come to incarnate 'the man suicided by society' as Antonin Artaud wrote, and his case seems to attract fantastical theories blaming everyone except

the suicidal man himself for his suffering. The truth is likely to be disappointingly straightforward: Van Gogh shot himself in the chest, in a perfectly lucid and deliberate manner, because this seemed to him the best thing to do. ∞

72



← Arguments supporting the idea that Van Gogh did not commit suicide

AT THE START OF THE 20th CENTURY, PHOTO POST CARDS were all the rage. Auvers-sur-Oise was popular with visitors and, then as now, enjoyed a reputation for picturesqueness. The village and its surroundings were photographed from many angles and thousands of copies of these images were sent across the country and abroad. →

73

Today, these real photo post cards (known as RPPCs to collectors) are highly sought after and often shared online, ensuring the formal and informal conservation of these historical scenes. This is a godsend for art historians, who use the images to compare paintings by certain artists to photographs of the same motifs. In the case of Van Gogh, specifically, the post cards contribute to our understanding of the way he saw the world and transformed it into art.

The images most relevant here are of course the oldest ones dating to between 1900 and 1910, the closest available to Van Gogh's time in Auvers in 1890.

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Attacked at the very root

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In 10 to 20 years, a coppice on a slope such as the one in *Tree Roots* would naturally have undergone considerable changes. Erosion would have carried away rocks and earth; the trees, branches and roots would have grown and, since coppices are regularly cut down, sections would have been removed.

There are approximately three hundred photo post cards depicting Auvers during the Belle Epoque. One is captioned “37. – *Auvers-sur-Oise – Rue Daubigny*”. It shows a downward-curving road with a cyclist, seen from the back, standing to the left of his bicycle. It appears to be a young man. When the picture is enlarged, it becomes clear that he has stopped because his back tyre is flat. Although his posture is curiously similar to that of young people his age today, it is safe to assume that he is not on his smartphone letting his friends or parents know he’s late or that ‘it sucks’. To his right is an impressive array of tree roots exposed to the open air by the erosion of the slope they have overrun.

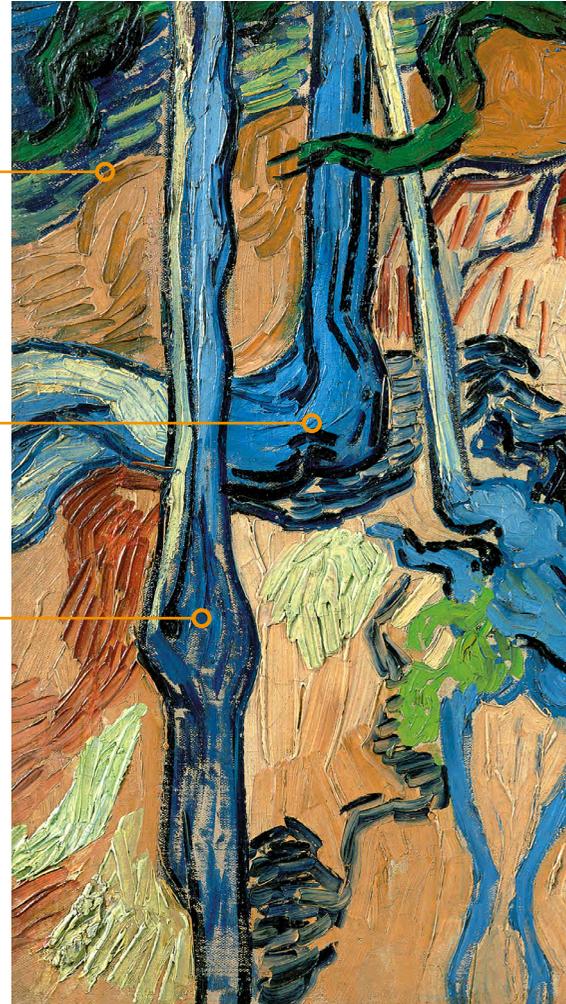
→ Post card, around 1905 to 1910,
reproduced at 1:1 scale



It is by dint of patient observation that the discovery described in this text was made. The details below are technical and possibly a little dry, but their description forms a necessary part of the exercise. The introduction provides an account of the excitement and emotion accompanying the discovery.

77 The shape of the crest of the slope in the photograph undeniably resembles the crest in the upper left section of Van Gogh's painting. This section shows two tree trunk bases: one reaching in from the left to form a right angle before branching off to the sky, the other running across the painting from top to bottom. A darker, thickened section is visible towards the exterior of the right angle formed by the first trunk. On the vertical upright trunk, a knot can be seen about a third of the way up. →

This very specific layout consisting of the crest of the hillside, the two trees and their distinct characteristics, in particular the injury on the outside of the angle formed by the first tree trunk and the knot (burr) on



the second tree, is disturbingly similar to the details on the photo post card depicting Rue Daubigny.

79 Naturally, both the growth and coppicing of these trees must be considered, as well as the fact that the angle of the photograph, taken some time between 1900 and 1910, is different to that of Van Gogh's painting from 1890. The painter's field of view should be visualised as being from a few meters to the front, at the side of the road. Here, as can be seen on other photos of the same location and era, but taken from the opposite side, the street has a fairly large shoulder allowing the artist enough space to comfortably set up his equipment without hindering traffic — although this was evidently not a concern for the draughtsman in the image below. →

In 1890, this road was known simply as 'Main Road' and ran between the hillside and the river, connecting Lisle-Adam to Pontoise. It was a bustling street and on a very hot Sunday, as on that day of 27 July, many people walking past and going to the nearby church



would have seen the painter and his large stretcher of 50 cm in height and one meter in width.

It is difficult to understand the layout of the scene by studying the painting. However, it is important to note that the work is unfinished, and that Van Gogh often retouched his pieces. The motif would perhaps have been easier to discern in the completed version.

81

As can be seen in *Daubigny's Garden*, Van Gogh was able to combine several fields and angles of view in one painting. For many years, he had used a perspective frame, which he deployed in a particularly creative, dynamic and innovative manner. He documented his use of this tool in several letters, even including explanatory sketches. Although he no longer used it during his time in Auvers-sur-Oise, the perspective frame had profoundly influenced his artistic practice. It is therefore not surprising that he was able to capture quite a wide 'corner of nature' from a relatively close distance. →



When using a perspective frame, the draughtsman is meant to select an unmoving focus point so that the eye is fixed in one position when looking at a scene. If, as shown in the sketch below, the eye is not repositioned in the same spot every time, and the draughtsman moves forwards, backwards, up, down and to the left and right, then the perspective frame will not serve to achieve the optically consistent point of view of a photograph. But this is not surprising, as Van Gogh's artistic practice had in part developed in reaction to photography. He tried to capture that which photography could not — principally, colour, but also whatever meaning he saw in the motif beyond its mere depiction.

→ Sketch depicting the use of the perspective frame

83

In Van Gogh's art, there are no faithful reproductions of observed scenes. Even *The Church at Auvers* is filled with details that are inconsistent with the optical and architectural facts. Every year, tens of thousands of tourists scrutinize the front (or, more accurately, the back) of the monument to identify the angle from which it was painted. But such an angle does not and

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never did exist, even if in the artist's time there was a slope which would have provided some extra height. Van Gogh, in art as in life, simply did not stay in one place. What he wanted to extract from nature was that which would allow him to create art as opposed to brilliant imitations of reality.

85

A second group of tree trunks, in the central left section of Van Gogh's painting, form a tangled cluster of trunks, leaves and roots. The curves and dark bulges on the blue, somewhat horizontal, shape in the middle are hard to interpret. This shape is connected to three rising trunks. The one on the right splits into two about two thirds of the way up. From the left end of the shape, a sort of blue lyre descends to the bottom of the frame. →

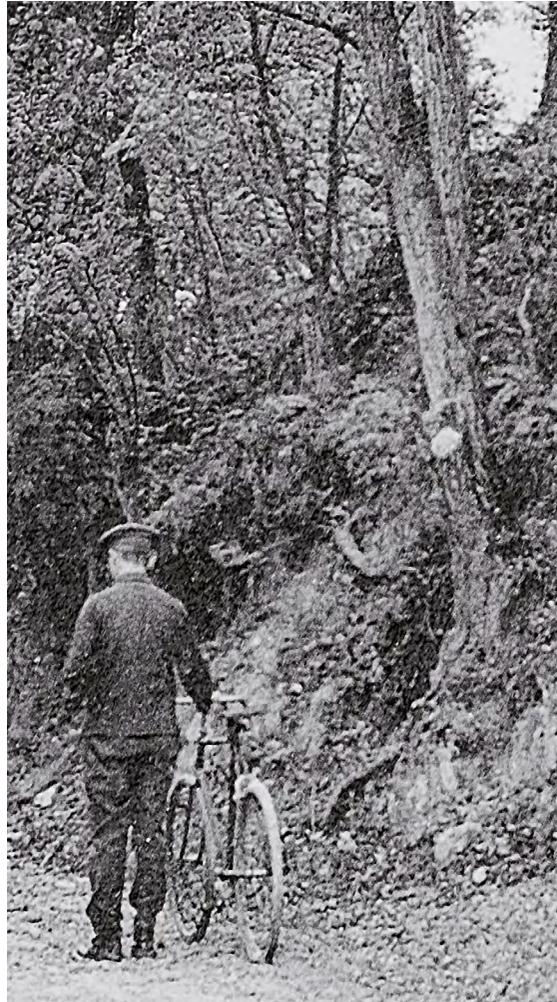
On the photo, the horizontal shape with its bulges is clearly visible. On the left, the lyre-shaped object can be seen from a slightly different angle. Above are only two parallel tree trunks, compared to four in the painting. The trunk on the left, the slenderest on the



painting, is entirely missing. This could be for several reasons. The one in the middle is intact and the one on the right no longer splits into two. However, a freshly cut stump is visible at the place where it branched off in Van Gogh's time. This slanting cut can also be seen elsewhere on the photo, to the right of the cyclist, → where two trunks have been cut down in the same way.

87

The right half of the painting is only partly visible on the photo and the angle chosen by the photographer further obscures the matter. On the painting, at the base of the trunk in the middle, is a red and green space which seems to depict earth and foliage, and from which emerges a young yellow and blue stem, tapering off to the left. The shadow of the trunk is represented as a blueish zigzag to the right. Finally, a young shoot splitting off is drawn in broken lines, swerving to the right and appearing to support dense foliage.



The photo is more difficult to decipher, but the remains of the young branch at the same angle can be seen. Above, some foliage is visible, but it is unclear whether this is connected to the small trunk or whether it is more recent growth.

89

A small miracle of natural conservation has occurred here. When this location was physically checked in 2020 to identify the angle of view of the photograph for a comparison with the artwork, the results were astonishing. The complex structure of tangled trunks and roots immortalised by the painter and photographer at a 15-year interval is still there. The mummified remains are even more imposing and still extremely expressive. This is the one organic object painted by Van Gogh that can still be seen today and it seems almost as if destiny had a hand in ensuring that it should appear on his very last painting.

Groundwork (in the literal sense) has revealed the shape of the slope depicted by Van Gogh: a quarter sphere. On the right of the painting can be seen a

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tangle of blue trunks which no longer seems to exist, as the ground in which they grew was excavated and removed. Next to the road, a wall has also been erected, which nevertheless reveals the original layout of the terrain.

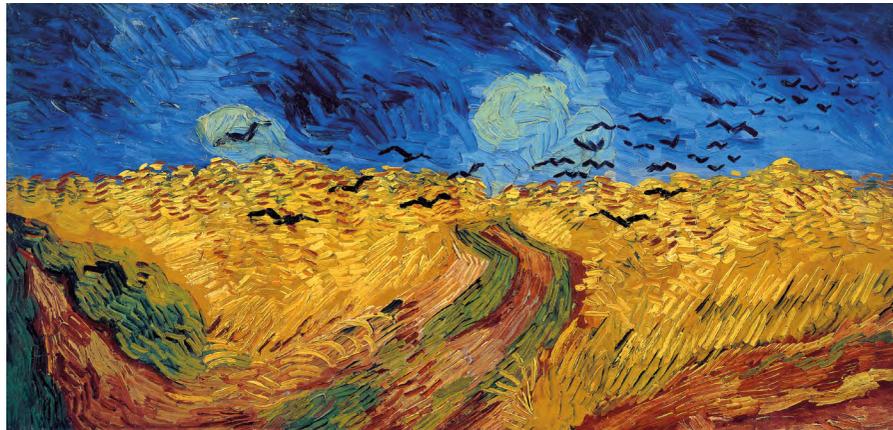
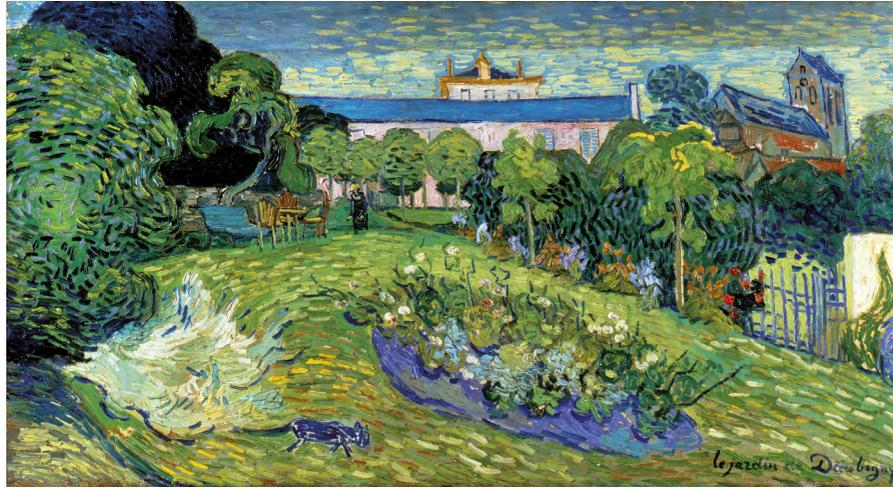
When painting, Van Gogh often looked in several directions to combine his different points of view in one artwork, as can be seen in *Daubigny's Garden* → and *Wheatfield with Crows*. It is therefore entirely plausible that *Tree Roots* is a re-composition of several elements observed by the painter, some of which can still be seen today.

91

The light touches of yellow on the lower part of the painting are another element confirming that this is the subject of *Tree Roots*. These are rocky bits of the light limestone face poking through, among which the roots have established themselves as best they can. Again, the rocky parts of the painting are in the same position on the post card. They too are surrounded by sand-coloured areas in patterns which are also similar.

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These elements are, however, much less visible today. An impressive maple tree has made itself at home in the middle of this section of the slope and the earth has been worn away, possibly by the construction work undertaken on this small piece of land.

→ Superimposition of *Tree Roots* and a photo of the place it was painted taken in June 2020

93

This hillside consists of several ground layers, as do all the hillsides of Auvers-sur-Oise: marl, sand, stones and Lutetian limestone overlay and disintegrate into each other due to erosion. In Van Gogh's painting, there is a clear demarcation between at least two kinds of earth behind the trunks. This demarcation can again be found on the post card and is observable there today. This terrain is adjacent to a limestone quarry, one of many in Auvers. This quarry, however, differs in one respect: it has a distinctive light yellow stabilising wall containing an alcove with a small virgin intended to protect the quarrymen who risked their lives exercising their profession. This light wall can be seen in the upper right section of Van Gogh's painting.

↓



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Attacked at the very root

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97 An important argument in favour of the theory that *Tree Roots* was painted in 'Main Road' (later renamed Rue Daubigny) is the fact that it is consistent with one of Vincent's steadfast habits: painting whatever he found interesting in his immediate surroundings. → In the Hague, Nuenen, Paris, Arles and Saint-Remy-de-Provence, he frequently worked in the areas close to where he lived and often captured what he could see from his window. In Nuenen, he painted the parsonage and its garden. In Arles, it was the *Yellow House*, numerous views of the park and *Café Terrace at Night*. In Auvers, he painted the *The Town Hall*, *The Church at Auvers*, *Daubigny's Garden*, the steps of Rue de la Sansonne, *Landscape with the Chateau of Auvers at Sunset* and *The House of Père Pilon*.

The suggested location for *Tree Roots* thus corresponds with the artist's policy of painting what was nearby. This approach, so typical of him, was rooted both in its simplicity and in an ability to find the extraordinary in the mundane.

Part v: *Investigation into the Location of the Motif*



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Attacked at the very root

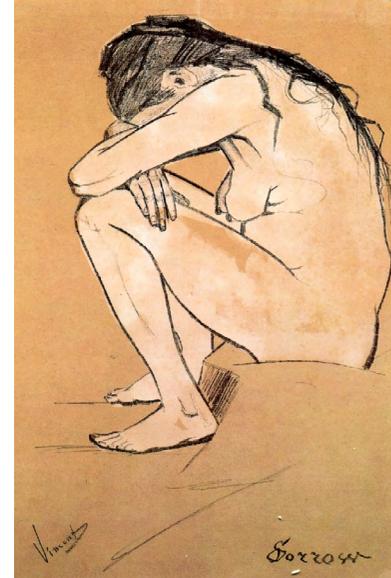
menu

Ultimately, the theme of this painting is disturbingly consistent with the tragic events following its incomplete creation. Eight years earlier, in 1882, Van Gogh had already connected a study he had made of tree roots to the struggle for survival. He described an ambitious drawing in the following terms:

“I’ve now finished two larger drawings. First of all, *Sorrow*, but in a larger format, the figure alone without surroundings. But the pose has been altered somewhat, the hair doesn’t hang down the back but to the front, part of it in a plait. This brings the shoulder, the neck and back into view. And the figure has been drawn with more care.

The other one, ‘Roots’, is some tree roots in sandy ground. I’ve tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure.

Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life’s struggle, both in that white, slender female



↑

figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots. Or rather, because I tried without any philosophizing to be true to nature, which I had before me, something of that great struggle has come into both of them almost inadvertently.” *To Theo, The Hague, 1 May 1882.*

↓



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Of course, even though the account above provides credible and coherent explanations for all the elements in the painting, it cannot be affirmed with absolute certainty that the location has been identified. It is, at best, a highly plausible theory. The strongest argument against it is that similar sites can be found for hundreds and hundreds of continuous meters in Auvers. Who is to say that Van Gogh's painting does not contain a characteristically free interpretation of a similar place?

It would be near impossible to refute this argument, even though extensive field work has not revealed another terrain in the shape of a quarter sphere, as depicted in the painting, and allowing the artist to

set up his easel far enough from his subject without disturbing traffic, facing the south (judging from the effect of the sunlight on the trunks) with a quarry to his right and a patch of blue sky discernible to his left. Nevertheless, Auvers-sur-Oise has changed significantly in 130 years and it is not beyond the realms of possibility that such a place exists.

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Another possible reservation is that the lower and upper trunks as well as the roots could very well have changed their shape as they developed over the years. My instinctive feeling is that one is as likely to find two identical pieces of forest as two persons with the same fingerprints. The question was however addressed to Bert Maes, who is a specialist in the history of forestry and co-author of the 2012 paper with Van Tilborgh identifying the motif of this painting. His verdict was unambiguous: he believes the location identified here is most probably the correct one. [cf. annexe 3]

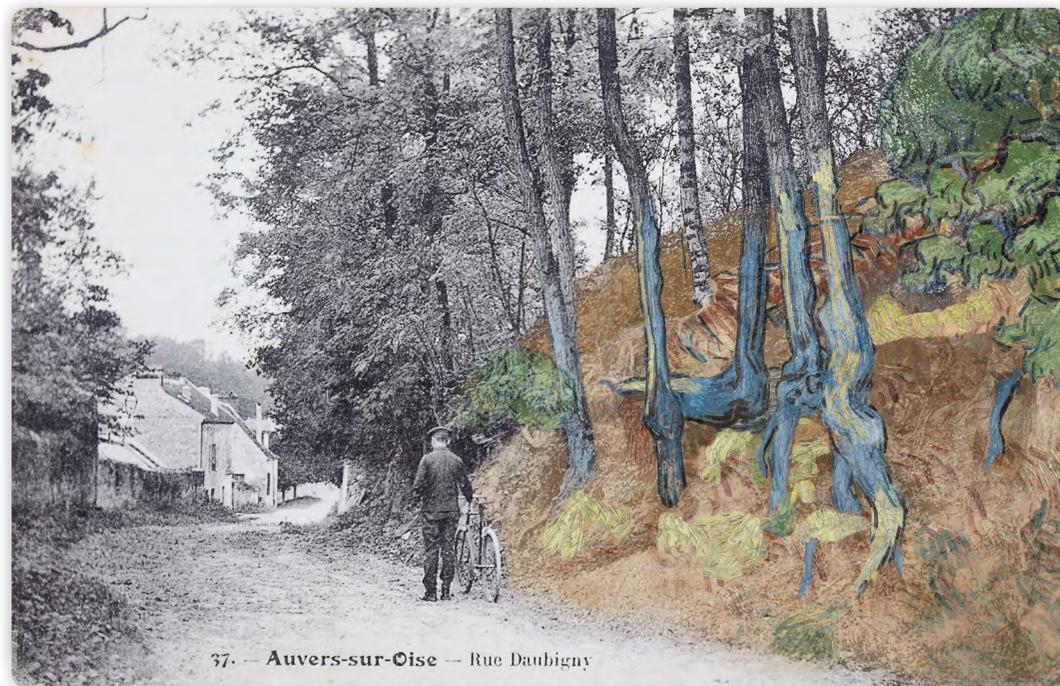
Finally, there is the focal length of the camera and the optical distortion in the photo on the post card.

The terrain seems higher than it should be, but so does the wall on the left. Several shots taken with a DSLR with a 24 mm × 36 mm sensor and a 24 mm lens provided results that were not too dissimilar. The photographer who captured the image for the post card may have used a 9 cm × 13 cm glass plate, which was common at the time. However, the distortion is difficult to replicate as the photographers of the day were adept at improvising and often devised their own tools and tricks to achieve the desired result.

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With the information currently available to us, the best option is probably to consider that the place Van Gogh painted his last work has been found – until, of course, proof to the contrary presents itself. Scientific theories are by their nature never definitive and will always change with the advent of new ideas – be they counter-intuitive, disturbing, or as is more often the case, a source of wonder. ∞

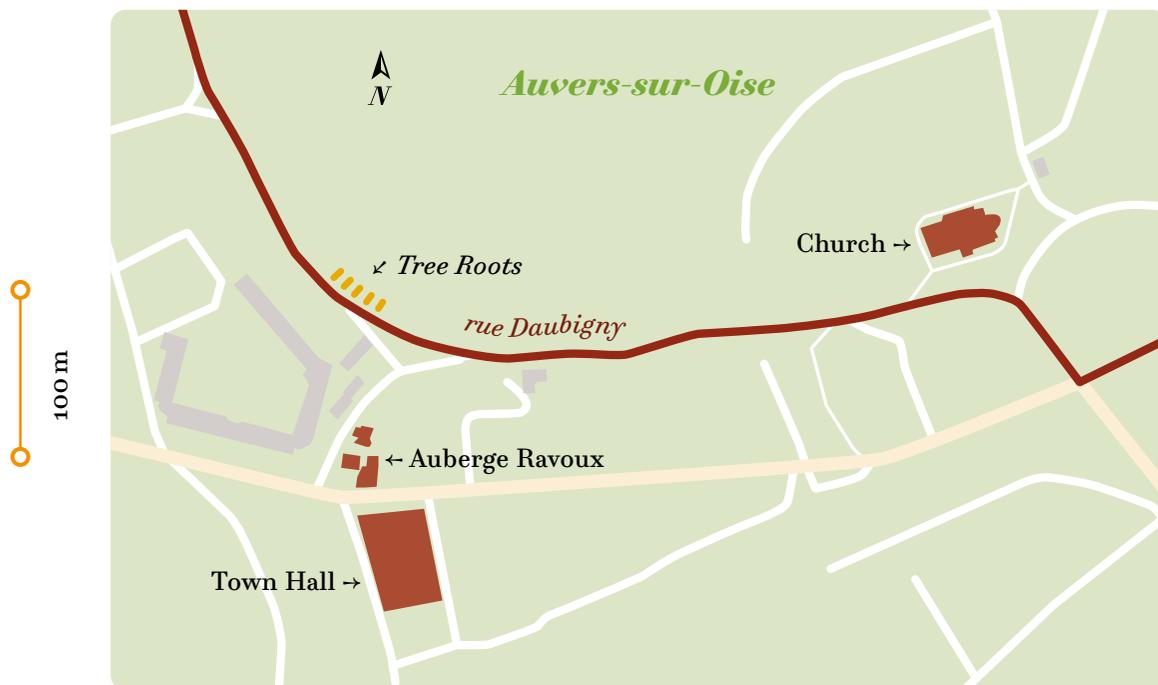




37. — Auvers-sur-Oise — Rue Daubigny

THIS SECTION OF RUE DAUBIGNY IS ABOUT 150 METERS from the Auberge Ravoux, quite literally on the street corner. Most likely, Van Gogh followed his usual routine, as described by Adeline Ravoux in her first interview, which has never been published before and is included as an annexe to this text. This routine consisted of rising early and working on the motif the whole morning before taking his midday meal at the Auberge Ravoux. In the afternoon, he retouched the painting and applied any finishing touches. However, as several paintings from the Auvers period clearly show, Van Gogh sometimes decided to spend the afternoon (*The Church at Auvers*) or the early evening (*Landscape with Twilight*) capturing the subject. Additionally, 27 July was a very hot day, and it is possible that the painter would have preferred to spend the afternoon painting outside instead of staying inside in the improvised studio provided by Ravoux.

Conclusion *and Significance*



Attacked at the very root

menu

The piece of land painted by Van Gogh faces the south. The light, which he represents on the surface layer of paint touching the trunks and the leaves, seems to indicate that the sun lit the scene from left to right. This lighting is characteristic of this spot at the end of the day. The accounts of Adeline Ravoux and Paul Gachet agree that shortly after the time they usually had their evening meal, Van Gogh returned ‘from behind the castle’, where they assumed he had fired the fatal shot. The place and time are confirmed in the testimony of Emile Bernard, who provided a detailed albeit second-hand account in a letter to Albert Aurier on 2 August. He wrote that ‘on Sunday evening, he went out into the countryside near Auvers, placed his easel against a haystack and went behind the chateau and fired a revolver shot at himself.’ This indication of the time of his departure, although imprecise, narrows the window of time down to a few hours. This chronology is further supported by the theory that *Tree Roots* was still on the easel at the end of the afternoon, a few steps from the Auberge. *Tree Roots* was therefore perhaps started on the morning of 27 July, as claimed

by Andries Bongers, but the last touches were applied as a result of late-afternoon observation of the scene.

This means that between the creation of *Tree Roots*, which would have taken until late afternoon, and his departure from the Auberge before the evening meal, there was not much time for Van Gogh to become embroiled in a fight with the Secrétan brothers in a farmyard. According to Naifeh and Smith, it could have been a chance encounter, their already implausible account also reliant on a coincidental meeting. It seems more likely that, having worked for hours on a painting preoccupied with the relentless struggle between life, death and the suffering between the two, Van Gogh, feeling alone and seeing no alternative, decided to find his earthly rest with the setting sun, on the outskirts of the village with a view of a freshly-harvested wheat field.

Emile Bernard, whose version of events is not without its weaknesses, but benefits from greater proximity to the tragedy than Naifeh and Smith in 2011,

confirmed this explanation, writing that Van Gogh had died ‘explaining that his suicide had been absolutely deliberate and that he had done it in complete lucidity.’

There is nothing in the testimonies of Gachet Jr, Adeline Ravoux or Bernard to indicate that Vincent behaved in an unusual or irrational manner that day. What is out of the ordinary and remains to be explained is that he did not finish the painting, which was close to the degree of completion typical of his work. It is tempting to interpret this as somehow significant, a deliberate renunciation, or recognition that he had reached a final pinnacle.

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The identification of the location not only renders the order of events on 27 July 1890 more plausible, but also adds weight to the theory Van Tilborgh and Maes published in 2012. Van Gogh was not inventing abstraction in painting with this disconcerting work. He was merely doing what he had always done: capturing the reality of what he saw in the manner he wished to see it. The theory published a year later

↓ *Tree Roots*, detail from an unfinished part of the painting



“Others may have more clarity of mind than I for abstract studies — and you might certainly be among them, as well as Gauguin and perhaps myself when I’m old. But in the meantime I’m still living off the real world. I exaggerate, I sometimes make changes to the subject, but still I don’t invent the whole of the painting; on the contrary, I find it ready-made — but to be untangled — in the real world.”

To Emile Bernard, Arles, on or about 5 October 1888

by Van Tilborgh and Meedendorp seems even more convincing: the artwork, both in its theme and proximity to the act of suicide, is a painted farewell note, depicting in colour the first lines of the last letter he wrote to Theo dated to around 23 July: *“I’d perhaps like to write to you about many things, but first the desire has passed to such a degree, then I sense the pointlessness of it.”* Van Gogh had not been taken by madness, but by melancholy.

111 *Tree Roots* reminds us that Van Gogh did not need to travel or look far to uncover feelings of immense and existential depth. 150 meters from his bed, on a road which hundreds of people took every day, he found a motif that would fascinate and perplex art lovers for decades to come. Once one has seen what Van Gogh saw, however, no learned theory is required to understand the painting. It is completely accessible and its meaning obvious, despite taking 130 years to reveal itself to us on a post card. For many years seen as a daring exploration of dizzying philosophical and artistic heights, the only dizzying aspect is, in fact, its

simplicity. It is perhaps not so very surprising that the explanation was found in March 2020, a period of social isolation due to Covid-19, which has forced us to return to the essential and precious treasures sometimes right in front of us.

Not everyone will understand that the triumph of a life sometimes resides in choosing death. Van Gogh was in that respect perhaps of untimely modernity.

112 Visitors to Auvers-sur-Oise, and this is surely the most important aspect of the discovery, will now have a new landmark to visit. Before, it was possible to contemplate the tombs of Vincent and Theo and visit the room where the brothers bid each other farewell. Henceforth, we can stand at the very place where Van Gogh painted his last masterpiece.

End

Title: *Vincent Van Gogh* | **Programme Title:** *Art and Life*

Collection : RDF / RTF / Other (1949-1963)

Recording date: Thursday 02/04/1953 | **First aired on:** Thursday 02/04/1953

In honour of the anniversary of Vincent van Gogh's birth on 30 March 1853, Georges Charensol interviews M^{rs} Adeline Carrié, 77, the famous *woman in blue*, who was Van Gogh's last model and who was in attendance at his final moments, as well as her sister M^{rs} Guilloux.

*This document was rediscovered and made public by Frantz Vaillant
and transcribed by Wouter van der Veen*

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Announcer

Today, we will be talking about [Van Gogh]. It may seem as if there is nothing more to say about a painter whose life and work have been the subject of such meticulous scrutiny. However, we have discovered in [Manière-en-Bray] reads: '*Mesnières-en-Bray*', in the Seine-Inférieure Mrs Adeline Carrié, the famous woman in blue, who was Van Gogh's last model and who was in attendance at his final moments. She agreed to come to Paris to tell our listeners what she remembers of the man who cut off his own ear.

Georges Charensol

Mrs Carrié is here, across from me. She is 77 years old; she is remarkable, very lively and intelligent. Next to her are her sister, Mrs Guilloux, and our correspondent Maximilien Gauthier. Mrs Adeline Carrié, I would like you to tell our listeners about the two and a half months that Vincent van Gogh lived with your parents, a period which ended, as we all know, with his tragic suicide. How did Vincent van Gogh come to be a guest at the inn of your father, M^r Ravoux, in Auvers?

Adeline Carrié-Ravoux

He came and of course he asked the price, firstly whether we had any rooms, and oh my goodness, we got on, my parents got on well with him and he became our guest.

[GC] Because there were many painters in Auvers — an extremely picturesque village, very close to Pontoise — painters often came to the Auberge Ravoux, which was owned by your father. It was a place they enjoyed visiting.

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[AC] Very often, yes. We even made a room available for them, you could say they were at home in that room, where they could paint, do what they wanted with their artworks, leave their easels, their bits and pieces, whatever they wished.

[GC] So it was a kind of studio that the innkeeper made available to his guests.

[AC] That's right.

[GC] How many painter-guests did you have at the inn...in that spring of 1890?

[AC] Very few, Monsieur. All in all, three. Tommy Hirsch, Hirschig, I think that's how it's pronounced...

[GC] ...who was Dutch...

[AC] ...Dutch, and who was the son of a Dutch naval officer. The third was a Spaniard who was in exile due to the Don Carlos movement and who was apparently quite a renowned aquafortist. Martinez de Valdivielso.

[GC] So Van Gogh took his meals at your parents' inn with these two painters. He very regularly ate at the inn at midday and in the evening...

[AC] Always. Very regularly.

[GC] He took all his meals there during...

[AC] All his meals were taken at the inn without exception. That's why we were so surprised the day he missed one.

[GC] Right. So therefore, when Van Gogh's biographers all say he had lunch or dinner at

Dr Gachet's house two or three times a week, you believe this information to be inaccurate.

[AC] Completely inaccurate. Oh yes, completely.

[GC] So Van Gogh arrived at the inn and then what did he do? Did he stay in that room, did he work there, or did he more often go out into the countryside?

[AC] Well, he often went into the countryside, and then came back, having made some sketches, as I believe they're called?

[GC] Just so.

[AC] And then afterwards painted on the canvases.

[GC] So he worked on them...on site...

[AC] He worked on them on site at the house. And then, at other times, if his sketches weren't finished, he left again after lunch and worked on them straightaway at the place he had painted, you know, and he would come back in the evening, but always punctual for meals.

[GC] In all of the artworks by Vincent van Gogh, there are four paintings depicting you. One of these portraits is the famous *Woman in blue*, which is currently in America, and the other three are described as portraits of Mademoiselle Ravoux. Yet you just told me a few minutes ago that you sat for Van Gogh for one canvas only. That is a mystery we will entrust to the wisdom of art historians, but you, Madam, are adamant, are you not, that you have absolutely no knowledge of these three portraits that do however resemble you, in which your profile is very easily recognisable, the profile I now see in front of me. On the other hand, you sat for him for quite a long time, you told me, for the *Woman in blue*. And so, would you describe for us the circumstances in which you modelled for Vincent van Gogh.

[AC] He asked me to sit for him, you know, and I quite happily agreed because he was a very simple and a very kind man, and so yes, I sat for him for a few sessions.

[GC] How many sessions, more or less?

[AC] Maybe six, maybe...I don't think it was more. Five or six sessions. Not more.

[GC] Five or six sessions.

[AC] Yes.

[GC] And did you follow the progress of his work, were you interested in what he was doing?

[AC] I was interested and I wasn't very satisfied with it! [laughs]

[GC] You thought it a very harsh painting?

[AC] That painting disconcerted me, really, you know. [laughs] And so...I said: 'Yes, very well, he is making my portrait but it will never resemble me...!'

[GC] We know that Van Gogh, after the terrible event where he had cut off his ear in Arles, was sectioned in an asylum in Saint-Remy. What do you think of that? I believe you have a strong opinion.

[AC] Very strong, and it is based on what he told us himself, as well as his brother.

[GC] Please do tell.

[AC] Well. When he...when my father was with him after he...his suicide attempt...

[GC] The last day of his life.

[AC] Yes. The day...When it happened.

[GC] Yes.

[AC] My father said to him: 'What have you done?', you know, he said: 'Well, this time I didn't miss, not like the other time, at least this time I succeeded.' So my father said to himself: 'Why, he's tried this before, then' and because he was hard of hearing without his auricle, you know, immediately my father thought of that, indeed he had himself, he said to himself: 'Why, here's something I didn't know that sounds strange.' So when he had passed away, my father broached the subject with Theo, who said: 'Yes, that's true. He had... he had wanted to kill himself before, he shot himself with a revolver, but the recoil of the weapon meant that he removed his auricle.' So you know, quite simply, the weapon recoiled when he pulled

the trigger, and the shot probably went off like that and removed the auricle of his ear. That was Theo's theory, and...

[GC] Yes, but...

[AC] ...he himself told us this, [in]? he expressly told us, that he had wanted to kill himself.

[GC] That is what one would tend to call a white lie, because we know every minor detail about that business, and we know that after that terrible accident, if one can call it an accident, he was committed first to the hospital in Arles, then to the asylum in Saint-Remy, where he spent several months, and then, having been cured, or at least appearing healthy, he returned to Paris and his brother Theo probably advised him to go work in the very beautiful countryside of Auvers-sur-Oise. During this period, you didn't notice anything strange, you thought you were in the presence of a man who was completely...

[AC] Completely normal, completely well as he always...as he had been until the end, and

even at the time of his suicide, we didn't notice any instability.

[GC] During the sessions you sat for him, when you were Van Gogh's model, what was he like? Did you get the impression of a man completely absorbed in his painting, or did he sometimes speak to you a little?

[AC] Very little. More absorbed in his painting. Smoking.

[GC] Smoking a lot.

[AC] Oh yes, his pipe. But not trying to make conversation.

[GC] You are certainly the la... the last person still alive today who inspired him to create one of his most famous paintings, and I would like us to speak of that famous day in July 1890. I believe you were expecting him that evening for dinner, as you did every day.

[AC] That's right.

[GC] There was nothing odd and...

[AC] No, nothing, no.

[GC] It was a day like all the others.

[AC] It was a day like all the others, except that dinner time went by without him appearing. It was a very hot day, after dinner my parents went to sit by the door, with me,...and very worried about him not appearing, we were wondering what could have happened to him. When we saw him coming, he seemed strange...we said: 'How strange is, there is Monsieur Vincent, but...?', so when he arrived in front of us, my mother said to him: 'Oh, Monsieur Vincent, we were very worried. What happened to you? I hope you're not having any problems?' He said: 'No, but...,' and he hurried past, very quickly.

[GC] And he entered the inn.

[AC] He entered the...he went to his room. He took the staircase going to his room. So we said to ourselves: 'He's being very strange.' My father got up, went to listen at the door of his staircase and heard him moaning. [Uhm he said that] something, he went up and then

he said to him: 'What's wrong?' He lifted his clothes, he said: 'Here, look...,' he showed his... his wound.

[GC] He showed the injury that he had to his side, yes?

[AC] He showed the inj...yes, a small very round hole, apparently.

[GC] The bullet hole from the revolver.

[AC] Exactly.

[GC] And he didn't bring back the revolver.

[AC] And it was never found.

[GC] The revolver was never found.

[AC] They searched for it. Theo went with my father the next day, they searched all the places he could have done it, they didn't find it.

Maximilien Gauthier

(also present in the studio)

Yes, it was said that they were behind the castle.

[AC] Yes, it was around there, in all those corners.

[GC] And...at that time, he lived in a very small room which was a sort of attic, in fact.

[AC] That's right. A small attic.

[GC] And to your...your parents took care of him and I believe they went to fetch a doctor.

[AC] Immediately. Naturally, you know, when my father realised that he had been shot, he was... he needed medical care. And so we wanted... him to be treated by a doctor who... but there weren't any in the area. And we remembered that Doctor Gachet although not practising was still a doctor and that he could perhaps treat him. And he arrived and confirmed that it was suicide and he said to my father: 'Well, he is lost. There is absolutely nothing that can be done. We can only wait for the end. In his condition

nothing can be attempted.' And so he left. And then the next day he came back to see how it was going. He was increasingly low because it was the end. And he came back when he was dead, for the confirmation of death.

[GC] He spent the night...

[AC] With my father.

[GC] ...with your father.

[AC] With my father.

[GC] Who, naturally...

[AC] Gave him...

[GC] didn't leave him.

[AC] Who gave him what the doctor had said to give him... I don't know what he gave him...a... something to make him feel better probably or calm him, I don't know what.

[GC] Yes, to calm him.

[AC] In any case, my father gave him what was necessary. He stayed with him until the next day.

[GC] And the next morning, Doctor Gachet came back and by that time, Vincent van Gogh was dead...

[AC] That's right. No! He came before he died, you know, to see how he had spent the night. He worried about his patient. And then because he was still alive, he left again and said: 'I will come back in [inaudible].'

[GC] And you decided to inform his brother?

[AC] So his father...his brother we informed by cable. He came, I'm not sure at what time, but...

[GC] Sometime in the day...

[AC] As soon as possible. Oh yes, it would have been early.

[GC] Vincent was still alive at that time?

[AC] Vincent was not...I don't know.

[GC] You can't recall this detail.

[AC] I can't recall this detail. I couldn't tell you yes or no.

[GC] After the death of Vincent, his brother Theo wanted to make a gesture to those who had looked after Vincent, not true?

[AC] That's right, those who had [incited/assisted]?, yes. He wanted to offer, not knowing how to give his thanks, a few paintings by his brother. [To, therefore, firstly]?, my father, to take some, but as we already had the *Town Hall* and my portrait, my father refused, saying those had been payment enough. And as for Gachet, who was there with his son, so then Gachet took down the paintings and he rolled them up passing them to his son, saying: 'Roll, Coco.' And Coco rolled. A...about a dozen or fifteen paintings... Because he really helped himself.

[GC] These are the paintings which, for the most part, now belong to the Louvre Museum.

[AC] Probably.

[GC] I am looking at a very moving photograph. It shows the inn in Auvers-sur-Oise, the Café Ravoux, in 1890, at the time Van Gogh was living there. On the left, ladies, we see your father,

you Mrs Guilloux, and in front of the door Mrs Carrié who you just heard, and in front of her, a girl who was very young at the time, as well as a small child holding an orange in its hand. This child with an orange, the son of a neighbouring carpenter, was painted by Van Gogh. Mrs Guilloux never modelled for Van Gogh, she was extremely young. But do you have a distant, vague memory of Vincent Van Gogh?

Germaine Guilloux

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Yes, I remember that in the evening when it was time for bed, I didn't want to go unless Vincent had drawn me a chalk picture on a slate of the sandman. So when he had drawn that, I would accept that I had to go to bed, as the sandman had come. There you go. And I remember his funeral very well. Because it made a great impression on me as a child, you know, that room filled with paintings, the body laid out with those... leaves, and then the... his palette, his brushes, all of that really... it is engraved in my memory, engraved.

[GC] ...a great impression. Very great.

[GG] Precisely.

[GC] The memories of Mrs Carrié and Mrs Guilloux are extremely precious and I believe that today we have recorded a document of extreme importance to the memory of Vincent van Gogh who was born in a small village in Holland exactly one hundred years ago.

→ *Woman in blue*



Letter written on 2 August 1890

The painter Emile Bernard describes Van Gogh's burial
to the art critic Gabriel-Albert Aurier

My dear Aurier

Your absence from Paris means that you have not heard the dreadful news which however I am obliged to tell you without delay:

Our dear friend Vincent died four days ago.

I think that you will have already guessed the fact that he killed himself.

On Sunday evening he went out into the countryside near Auvers, placed his easel against a haystack and went behind the chateau and fired a revolver shot at himself. Under the violence of the impact (the bullet entered his body below the heart) he fell, but he got up again, and fell three times more, before he got back to the inn where he was staying (Ravoux, place de

la Mairie) without telling anyone about his injury. He finally died on Monday evening, still smoking his pipe which he refused to let go of, explaining that his suicide had been absolutely deliberate and that he had done it in complete lucidity. A typical detail that I was told about his wish to die was that when Dr. Gachet told him that he still hoped to save his life, he said, "Then I'll have to do it over again." But, alas, it was no longer possible to save him...

On Wednesday 30 July, yesterday that is, I arrived in Auvers at about 10 o'clock. His brother, Theodore van ghohg [sic], was there together with Dr Gachet. Also Tanguy (he had been there since 9 o'clock). Charles Laval accompanied me. The coffin was already closed, I arrived too late to see the man again who had left me four years ago so full of expectations of all kinds... The

innkeeper told us all the details of the accident, the offensive visit of the gendarmes who even went up to his bedside to reproach him for an act for which he alone was responsible... etc...

On the walls of the room where his body was laid out all his last canvases were hung making a sort of halo for him and the brilliance of the genius that radiated from them made this death even more painful for us artists who were there. The coffin was covered with a simple white cloth and surrounded with masses of flowers, the sunflowers that he loved so much, yellow dahlias, yellow flowers everywhere. It was, you will remember, his favourite colour, the symbol of the light that he dreamed of as being in people's hearts as well as in works of art.

Near him also on the floor in front of his coffin were his easel, his folding stool and his brushes.

Many people arrived, mainly artists, among whom I recognized Lucien Pissarro and Lauzet, the others I did not know, also some local people who had known him a little, seen him once or twice and who liked him because he

was so good-hearted, so human...

There we were, completely silent all of us together around this coffin that held our friend. I looked at the studies; a very beautiful and sad one based on Delacroix's *La vierge et Jesus*. Convicts walking in a circle surrounded by high prison walls, a canvas inspired by Doré of a terrifying ferocity and which is also symbolic of his end. Wasn't life like that for him, a high prison like this with such high walls — so high... and these people walking endlessly round this pit, weren't they the poor artists, the poor damned souls walking past under the whip of Destiny?...

At three o'clock his body was moved, friends of his carrying it to the hearse, a number of people in the company were in tears. Theodore Van Gogh who was devoted to his brother, who had always supported him in his struggle to support himself from his art was sobbing pitifully the whole time...

The sun was terribly hot outside. We climbed the hill outside Auvers talking about him, about

the daring impulse he had given to art, of the great projects he was always thinking about, and of the good he had done to all of us.

We reached the cemetery, a small new cemetery strewn with new tombstones. It is on the little hill above the fields that were ripe for harvest under the wide blue sky that he would still have loved... perhaps.

Then he was lowered into the grave...

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Anyone would have started crying at that moment... the day was too much made for him for one not to imagine that he was still alive and enjoying it...

Dr Gachet (who is a great lover and possesses one of the best collections of impressionist painting of the present day) wanted to say a few words of homage about Vincent and his life, but he too was crying so much that he could only stammer a very confused farewell... (the most beautiful way, perhaps).

He briefly outlined Vincent's achievements, stating how sublime his goal was and how

great an admiration he felt for him (though he had only known him a short time). He was, Gachet said, an honest man and a great artist, he had only two aims, humanity and art. It was art that he prized above everything and which will make his name live.

Then we returned. Theodore Van Gogh was broken with grief; everyone who attended was very moved, some going off into the open country while others went back to the station.

Laval and I returned to Ravoux's house, and we talked about him...

But that is quite enough, my dear Aurier, quite enough, don't you think, about this sad day. You know how much I loved him and you can imagine how much I wept. You are his critic, so don't forget him but try and write a few words to tell everyone that his funeral was a crowning finale that was truly worthy of his great spirit and his great talent.

With my heartfelt wishes,

Bernard

Tree Roots, by Vincent van Gogh

Bert (N.C.M.) MAES, Drs

Ecologisch Adviesbureau Maes (Ecology Consultancy Maes)

Utrecht, The Netherlands – 30 may 2020.

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For thirty years, I have been conducting research on ‘wild’ or indigenous trees in the Netherlands and the neighbouring countries. Due to extensive forestry in the Netherlands and because wild trees have become incredibly scarce, the identification of indigenous wooded plants has become a field of specialisation. It is noteworthy that wild trees today are particularly likely to grow in places where the growth of bushes and trees was formerly controlled. These areas are not wildernesses, but in fact have a strong connection to human usage and control. What I find interesting is that Van Gogh chose to paint trees which had always been in contact with people and are clearly recognisable as such. Actually in a very accurate and realistic way! *Tree Roots* is an easily recognisable and

extremely realistic depiction of trees that have been cut down, left to grow new shoots, often with many branches, only to be cut down again, for centuries on end. This can also be seen in *Autumn Landscape with Four Trees* [F44], painted in Nuenen in 1885.

As admirers of Van Gogh and because there are no descriptions of where *Tree Roots* was painted and what exactly it represents, I went to Auvers to study the possibilities, accompanied by my wife Emma, who is also a biologist. In April 2005, having walked all around the many places where Van Gogh painted, we concluded that the painting depicts a steep face of limestone rock with coppiced trees and their shoots. The place it most resembled was one

of the old chalk quarries on Rue Gachet. For a while after that, the idea was set aside. Then in August 2011, we visited Auvers again, this time when the trees had leaves so we could get an idea of the kind of tree it could be. The trees on Rue Gachet were elms, more precisely wych or Scotch elms (*Ulmus glabra*). We also saw field elms (*Ulmus minor*) around Auvers, but we thought the wych elm a more likely possibility. Regarding our suggested location on Rue Gachet, the root structure and growth over the wounds (which develops after coppicing) can clearly be seen. It is evident that after 120 years the situation is not the same as in 1890. For that reason, we couldn't be one hundred per cent certain of the location. However, in Rue Gachet there are good examples to be found of what Van Gogh painted at the time. For this reason, it is recommended that this location as well as the original location identified by Wouter van der Veen be given protected status, both for science and for the pleasure of those who admire Van Gogh's art and visit Auvers.

Based on the discovery of Wouter van der Veen and the photograph of Rue Daubigny dating from the early 20th century, I judge it highly plausible that this is the location where *Tree Roots* by Van Gogh was painted. It seems most likely to have been wych elms. The resemblance between the current remains of the tree bases and roots and the old photo to Van Gogh's painting is extremely striking. What is important is that the trunk still contains information about the type of tree as well as its age and genetics. In the future, a DNA study of the dead wood could be made. Studies of the vegetation on similar slopes in and around Auvers could also provide more information about the kind of vegetation depicted on *Tree Roots*. In the article I wrote with Louis van Tilborgh, '*Van Gogh's Tree Roots up close*', we suggested several possible types of vegetation.

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1853 Birth of Vincent on 30 March in Groot-Zundert, a small town in North Brabant in the Netherlands.

1857 Birth of Theo on 1 May.

1862 Birth of Johanna Bonger on 4 October.

1872 The first letters of what will eventually become Van Gogh's collected correspondence are written.

1875 Vincent van Gogh displays little enthusiasm for his position as employee with the art dealers Goupil & Compagnie. His increasing religious zeal, however, starts to alarm his family.

1876 Works as an assistant teacher at a private school in Ramsgate, England. Later that year, he works as an assistant to a Methodist minister. He becomes ever more devout.

1877 Works in a book shop in Dordrecht in the Netherlands, then studies for the entrance exam to the University of Amsterdam, where he hopes to study theology in order to become a Protestant minister.

1878 Abandons his university plans and goes to the Borinage, a Walloon coal-mining area, where he leads a precarious existence as an evangelical preacher.

1880 His preaching contract is not renewed. He decides to 'pick up his pencil'. Struggles to teach himself draughtsmanship. Theo starts to send him money, which he will continue to do until the painter's death in 1890.

1882 Moving to The Hague, Van Gogh sets up house with Clasina Hoornik (Sien), a prostitute who is mother to one child and expecting another. Vincent is hospitalised due to venereal disease. He spends time with other painters, sets up a studio and draws incessantly while also trying his hand at oil and water painting.

1883 Returns to live with his parents in Nuenen in the Netherlands, having separated from Sien.

1885 His father dies in March. Shortly after, he paints his first major work, *The Potato Eaters*.

1886 Moves in with Theo, who is the manager of a branch of Valadon & C^{ie} on the Boulevard de Montmartre in Paris. Meets Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, among others.

1888 Leaves Paris for Arles, where he starts what he calls his 'Midi campaign'. He persuades Gauguin to join him. After two months of living together, Van Gogh has a mental breakdown. Gauguin makes his escape. Engagement of Theo and Jo.

1889 Experiencing hallucinations and sudden attacks of madness, he is voluntarily admitted to the asylum in Saint-Remy-de-Provence. Wedding of Theo van Gogh and Jo Bonger.

1890 Birth of Vincent Willem van Gogh, son of Theo and Jo. Van Gogh leaves Saint-Remy and arrives in Auvers-sur-Oise, where Doctor Gachet takes him on as patient and agrees to assist him if necessary. On 27 July, the painter fires a shot into his chest. He dies two days later.

1891 Death of Theo van Gogh on 25 January.

1905 Large retrospective exhibition of Vincent's oeuvre at the Amsterdam city museum.

1914 Publication of Vincent's letters to his brother by Jo Bonger. Theo's body is exhumed in Utrecht and reburied alongside Vincent's in Auvers-sur-Oise.

Attacked at the very root
An Investigation into the Last Days of Van Gogh

Dr Wouter van der Veen

This book is dedicated to the artisans, delivery staff, shopkeepers, healthcare workers and all the other nameless and unseen figures who have made sacrifices and risked their lives for others during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their selfless generosity is a shining example of the greatness of humankind.

My thanks in particular to Catherine, Dominique, Jeanine, Frantz, Stéphanie, Floris, Ivo, Mark, Hélène & Jean-François, Isabelle, Sandrine, Guillaume, Christophe, Hans, Leo, Marije, Louis, Teio, Alain, Sarah, Bert, Jean, Jean-Paul, Laurent, Denis, Marie-Claude, Bernard, Sam, Ben and Jonah. This book would not exist without you.

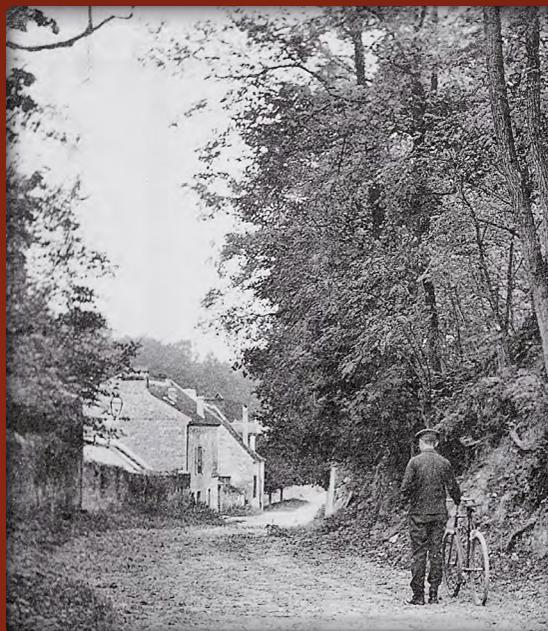
Finally, my thanks to the town of Auvers-sur-Oise and the Conseil Départemental du Val d'Oise, invaluable partners in the installation of the protective structures at the place where *Tree Roots* was painted.

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